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CONTENTS

NOVELETTES

"H" RUN by Alex Pong	24
THE RED HERRING by Richard Deming	86

SPECIAL FEATURE

MANHUNT'S GUN RACK	113
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SHORT STORIES

HOT SHOT by Robert Goodney	1
SPOT OF COLOR by Edith Fitzgerald Golden	14
PARTY POOPER by Dundee McDole	51
THE DECEIVER by Lucy Spears Griffin	60
OVERNIGHT GUEST by Frederick Chamberlain	73
CLEAR CONSCIENCE by Lawrence Harvey	82
A SWEET DEAL by Jack Lemmon	114
MOTHER LOVE by Marion Duckworth	125

MICHAEL ST. JOHN, Publisher

GERALD ADAMS, Art Director

JOE SHORE, Advertising Rep.

JOHN UNDERWOOD, Editor

J. PROSKE, Associate Editor

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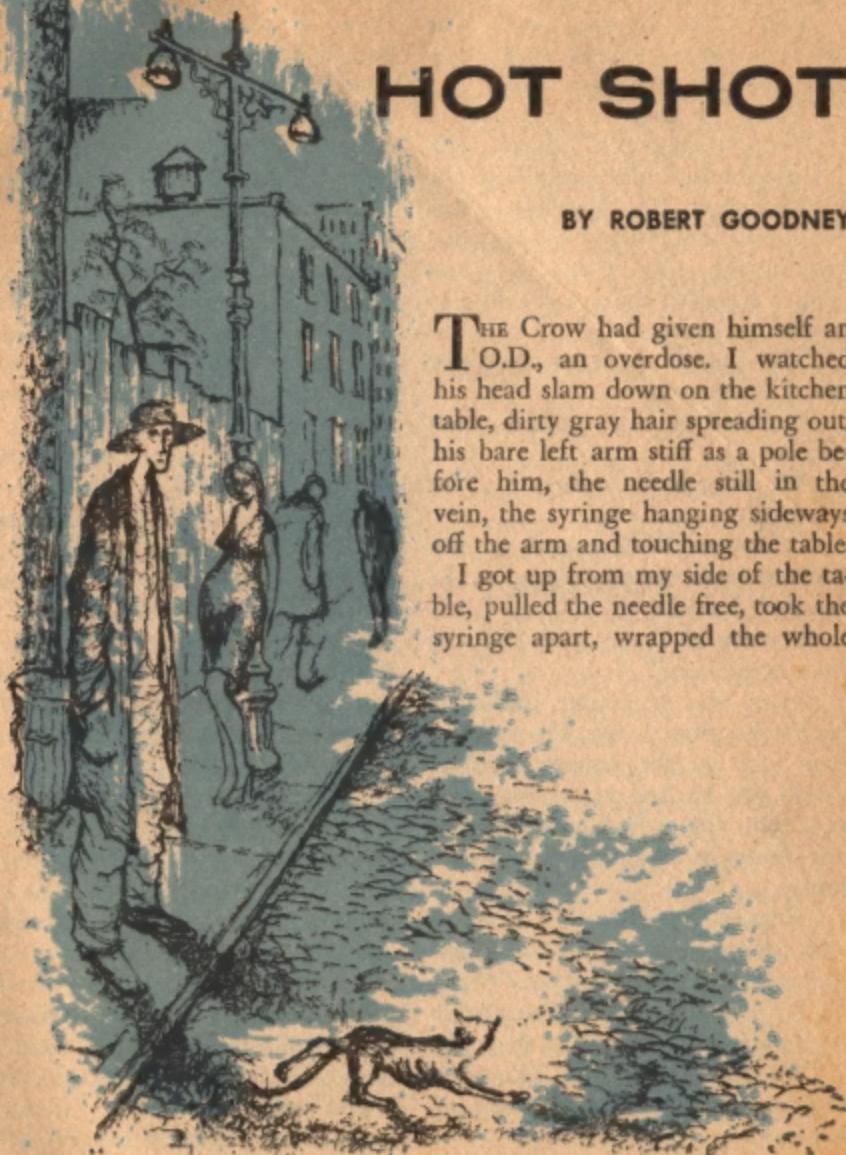
A "hot shot" is the junkie form of capital punishment . . . and I was head of the committee to abolish it.

HOT SHOT

BY ROBERT GOODNEY

THE Crow had given himself an O.D., an overdose. I watched his head slam down on the kitchen table, dirty gray hair spreading out, his bare left arm stiff as a pole before him, the needle still in the vein, the syringe hanging sideways off the arm and touching the table.

I got up from my side of the table, pulled the needle free, took the syringe apart, wrapped the whole



works in a piece of soft cloth, rubber-banded the cloth and put it in my jacket pocket.

Buster was bending over The Crow, anxiously feeling the pulse of that stiff left arm, eyes wide.

"Well?" I said.

"I can barely feel it," Buster said.

I put the back of my hand by The Crow's nose. His breathing was weak and shallow and his face was turning the color of wax. Any second, I expected the last shudder to shake his body.

"We should do something for him," Buster said.

We stood by the table looking down.

"We have to do something," he repeated.

"Of course. We'll go call an ambulance from the pay phone at the corner," I said.

"You do it," Buster said. "I'll stay here with him."

Buster was a young junkie, a junkie less than a year. He still had one foot in the square daytime world but he had more spirit and guts than the ordinary junkie. The one thing he lacked was common sense.

I cleaned the table off. The spoon and cotton went into the sink and the matches into my pocket. "Come on, we're going," I said. Buster didn't budge from his side of the table.

"We can't leave him like this! Maybe you can run but I'm not going to!"

I had to explain, patiently, as you

would to a child. "Listen, there's nothing we can do but call an ambulance. They'll do what has to be done. If they find you here, the fuzz'll break you. They'll say you gave him the shot. You've got needle tracks in your arm, you've got a record. They'll sweat you dry. What's another junkie to them? You want that, Buster?"

He looked at me for a moment, then turned and walked to the door. I followed him.

As we hurried toward the payphone, Buster said, "I never thought he'd give himself an overdose."

"It can happen to anyone—even old-time junkies like The Crow."

"He should have known better."

"How could he know? Didn't he say he got this from his new connection? Well, there was more H and less milk sugar there. How's The Crow to know what the mixture is? He just knows his own tolerance, his own fix. So he fixes. That's all. Wham."

"Wham! Some fix!" Buster said.

I called Bellevue and told them an addict was sick and gave them The Crow's address. I repeated it twice to make sure they had it right, and when they asked who was calling I hung up. Then Buster and I went across the street and waited. Fifteen minutes later, an ambulance with siren wailing appeared, followed by a police car, its siren going too: New York's one-note hello to The Crow.

Buster and I took a last look, then ducked into the subway station. Buster took the train for Brooklyn. I headed for Times Square.

Two days later, I was standing on the corner of 42nd Street and Eighth Avenue, feeling good. I'd had my morning fix and there was enough in my inside coat pocket for shots the next two days, plus a morning pickup. It was three in the afternoon and the street was packed with the scufflers scuffling by: night workers, boys and girls on the bum and the hustle, chronic unemployables, and an occasional office worker, heading for a coffee break, eyes forward, never noticing the real life on the street. Junkies rattled past too, sick and searching, and sometimes they stopped to work me. "Are you holding?" they asked.

"I'm looking."

"I'm sick and I can't find my man. Can you give me a taste?"

"A taste is all I've got."

Across the street I saw Buster. When he spotted me, he came over against the light, dodging traffic. He didn't say hello. The first thing he said was, "The Crow's dead."

"How do you know?"

"I'm up in Harlem last night trying to score. You remember Charles, the narcotic dick, the one that looks like a rabbit? Well, he's cruising Seventh Avenue and when he sees me, he stops his car and we go through our little routine against

the front of a liquor store. When he finds out I'm clean, we have a father-son conversation.—How have you been, Buster?—Isn't the weather terrible, Buster?—I hope you're keeping the right company these days, Buster. I answer, then all of a sudden he asks me about The Crow. I say I haven't seen him in two months and how is he? Charles shakes his head and says haven't I heard? The Crow is dead. Right away, I say—Overdose? That's when Charles tells me."

"Tells you what?"

"The Crow didn't die from an overdose, man. He got himself a hot shot. There was strychnine in his vein."

Strychnine looks and tastes like junk. It's given to informers who fix it, inject it and die with the same outward symptoms an overdose will give. But The Crow wasn't an informer; he was a junkie who'd been around New York for years, he was straight, he never ratted and he'd share a taste if you were sick. He'd given me a key to his apartment and for years I'd used it as a place to fix and flop. That was my testimonial for The Crow. It wasn't the kind of testimonial that should get you killed.

Buster and I were seated in a cafeteria on 42nd. We sipped our coffee, chewed our cupcakes and talked.

"Who'd kill The Crow?" Buster asked for the third time.

"Who was his new connection?

That's the joker who gave him the hot shot."

"The Crow said he got it down here. When he got back to the pad and you were still sleeping, he was laughing and he said that for the first time in his life, he'd been approached instead of doing the approaching. This cat came up to him and offered to sell a fifteen buck bag for three dollars. The Crow just laughed at him for trying to con an old vet. But the connection showed him the bag and let The Crow put a little on his tongue. The Crow said it tasted real, he gave the connection three bucks and split before the cat could change his mind. He comes back to the pad, tells me. You wake up. The Crow fixes. You know the rest."

"Did he say what the connection looked like?"

"Said he was an old guy—around sixty—wearing a big floppy black hat and a black raincoat. The Crow had never seen him before."

"Great. That's really great."

"Why would someone want to hot shot The Crow?"

"The connection is J. Edgar Hoover in disguise. It's his new way to stamp out the sinister drug menace: kill all the junkies."

"It's not funny," said Buster.

"So who's laughing?"

Just then Tommy Jenkins hustled in and headed for our table. Tommy was only a year older than Buster but he'd been on junk since he was fifteen. He didn't only carry

a monkey, he had the face of one. Tommy never wasted time or words. He talked like a telegram.

Leaning over our coffee cups, he said "Edward's dead."

Buster opened his mouth but Tommy put out his hand for silence. "Fuzz stopped me this morning. I'm last cat to see Edward alive. Landlady found him last night. Needle in arm. Called fuzz. Fuzz came. Carted Edward away. Then picked me up. Told me he was dead. Know how?" Tommy paused, then punched out his message. "Strychnine, hot shot!"

While Tommy went to get his coffee, Buster and I sat quiet. Over his cup of black, Tommy finished the story. "Didn't tell fuzz I knew where Edward bought stuff. Down here, Edward told me. Cat offered fifteen buck bag for two. Crazy, huh? Crazy way to get hot shot."

"The price is going down," I said. I told Tommy about The Crow. When I was through, Tom said, "Don't make sense. Why burn junkies?"

"Ask the man who's burning them," I said.

"Maybe the fuzz'll get him," said Buster.

Tommy laughed. "Don't know as much as we do. Don't know his price. Don't know he's old cat with black hat and coat. Fuzz got the bodies but they don't know. We know."

Outside dusk settled over 42nd Street. Bright blue, red and yellow

neon colored the sidewalk. The nine to five people had left for home and the hustlers toured the street, looking for marks to hustle. The street burned with activity and life.

"There's only one thing to do," I told Tommy and Buster. "Unless we all want hot shots, we have to find the connection."

Junkies live in a closed society. Like all societies, it has rules. Number one: Trust no one. But if you're hung up, sick, need a place to fix or hide, head for another junkie. He will be the only one who might understand and help. Other rules: Never drop a dime on a friend by informing or telling the fuzz where you get your junk. Be willing to share your spike (after first cleaning it with alcohol) and always save your cottons for the lean times ahead. Never ask help from a pusher. The fuzz and the pushers are in the same racket. One raises the price, the other raises your arms. In junkie jargon, they go by the same name: The Man.

There are rumors in a junkie's life. He lives on them. He hears there is someone in the Village selling good stuff, giving credit and offering a place to fix in. No one knows this pusher's name, but, so the story goes, if you stand down on Sheridan Square and buy a red carnation from an old man at eleven, by eleven-ten, the pusher will show up with a load of goodies for all red-carnation wearers.

This is a true story. The junkies *did* buy carnations from the flower peddler at eleven and leaned like cordwood against the front of a cigar store waiting for The Man. Eleven-ten came, as did eleven-thirty and eleven-forty-five. By midnight the stairs leading down to the IRT subway were littered with red carnations and ten sick junkies were strap-hanging up to Harlem or down to the lower east side. The rumor behind the rumor of the pusher said that the flower peddler had started the whole thing. He made enough from carnation-buying junkies to winter in Florida that year.

The junkie knows places and first names. He knows the cafeterias where he can nod over coffee and wait for The Man to appear, street corners where he can stand and connect, and all-night theaters where he can meet a pusher in the washroom at three a.m. He knows junkies called Ben, Betty, Doc, Snake, Letty and Duke who can introduce him to people called Al, Geek, Kim, Moose and Rose who in turn can introduce him to The Man, perhaps called Skin, Sara or Bill, but mostly just The Man. My Man.

This was the world we worked that night.

We went up to Harlem, hit the junkie hangouts and asked if anyone had seen the old man with cheap bags and a black hat. When they said they hadn't, we told them

to watch their step and then told them about The Crow and Edward. They said they'd watch. They'd pass the word. They were cool but a little scared.

Hoping for luck, we went from Harlem to the lower east side. Junkies dream-nodded at us, waved their hypes and said they'd be careful, they'd stay clean. They were straight now, they blissfully informed us, no one had died from his latest shot. There was no taste like the latest taste.

As we headed for Brooklyn, I asked Tommy the same question Buster had been asking me. "Why kill The Crow and Edward?"

"Cat just don't dig junkies," said Tommy.

"But why?"

"Don't need reason. Just don't."

Buster led us through the Brooklyn streets and into dimly lit pads where junkies listened and teaheads chuckled. That's what you get for going on the needle, the teaheads told us. You should have stayed with pot. There's never a hassle with that.

In one of the apartments we used my spike and took half a fix each to keep from getting sick. At midnight we were still in Brooklyn, tired.

Buster said, "We've got it made. Every junkie we saw tonight is going to tell another junkie. Inside two days, there won't be a cat in town that'll buy from an old man in a floppy hat."

"Seems straight," said Tommy. "Fact."

It seemed straight to me, too, until I thought of something. "Suppose he starts selling to pushers?" I said. "The guys we buy from or even somebody a step up from them. They don't know about this. They'll get the stuff, cut it down a little and package it. Right now, maybe they're selling on 42nd or in Harlem. One big load of stuff like that. Maybe the pusher sells fifteen, thirty fixes in a day. How many dead junkies is that?"

"He wouldn't do that," said Buster.

"What do you think, Tommy?"

While Tommy's monkey face wrinkled, my mind drew pictures. By tomorrow night some unknown pusher would be selling thirty hot shots and within an hour after his sales, all over town, the fuzz and the squares would be finding junkies: junkies in movie houses, washrooms, furnished rooms, staggering off rooftops, the works nailed in their arms, turning the color of wax, turning blue, the color of death. Tomorrow night, or the next, when I looked for a connection, what was I going to get?

Tommy touched my arm and his face was serious. "Right. You're right," he said. "We find him tonight."

One a.m. on Times Square. People were still on the sidewalk; hustlers had stopped looking for

squares to hustle and were hustling each other. The lights of the cafeterias, shooting galleries, hot dog stands and movie houses blazed.

"We'll work the theaters first," I said. "He might be there."

We divided them up with the arrangement that if one of us found the hot shot connection, he would stay with him until the others arrived.

The hustlers, the night people, were in the theaters too. Only the true desperado, insomniac and bum seeks the haven of a 42nd Street theater after midnight. The pick-pocket trade was there, the washroom outlaws, the old queens; near the water fountains lurked effete young men who asked each drinker for a match. I watched the street-walkers walking the aisles as though they were streets and I listened while madmen mumbled to the world and to themselves. I walked through lobbies and down the aisles of balconies and into the washrooms and I saw the things I always saw in these houses. The one thing I didn't see was an old man in a floppy black hat and a black coat.

Buster was waiting on the street. Tommy showed up a few minutes later. Tommy said, "Bumped into cat from Harlem. Word's out. He heard about it up there. Came down here. Saw man we want."

Buster and I said "Where?" together.

"Half block up. Saw man duck

into subway station. Tried to follow. Lost him."

Buster swore softly. "That means he's roaming around the city again."

"Ain't down here," said Tommy.

"Let's wait. Maybe he'll turn up again," I told them.

"He's gone home to make more hot shots," said Buster.

Tommy was glum. Buster was tired. I wanted to keep looking, but where do you start in a city of eight million?

Buster and Tommy half-heartedly agreed to my suggestion that we get coffee. We sat in the cafeteria and stared into our cups gloomily. I kept seeing dead junkies piled high, a hundred dead junkies because of one crazy man. Just animals killing each other, the square world around say. Maybe the fuzz would feel the same way. Who really cared what vermin like that did to each other?

I cared. The vermin cared.

When we finished our coffee, we shuffled out and stood under a theater marquee to make plans for tomorrow.

"We'll look again," I told them.

"Where, man, where?" said Buster.

"Right. Where?" said Tommy.

"The same places," I told them.

"Hopeless," said Buster. I doubted he would even show up tomorrow.

"Looks bad," Tommy said.

We looked at the theater posters to avoid each other's eyes and I

thought, They're right. It *is* hopeless.

Tommy's hand grasped my shoulder. "Dig!" he said and Buster and I followed his finger.

He was fifty feet from us, coming around the corner, his black rain-coat flapping like a sail behind him, the wide-brimmed black hat on his head. They'd been right, The Crow and Edward, he was old, but he moved agilely and warily. When he saw the three of us beneath the marquee, he seemed to sense what we were and he veered toward us. We didn't move.

"One of you guys got a cigarette?" he asked.

Buster silently gave him one; he lit it, sucked in the smoke.

"You need more than a smoke on a night like this," I said.

Tommy caught my cue and said, "Maybe booze."

"Something more warming than booze," I said. "Isn't that right, Pop?"

"There aren't many things more warming than liquor," the old man said. His eyes narrowed. "Anything special in mind?" he asked.

"White and warm," I said. "Like warm white snow."

I could see his mind click shut like a trap. He didn't bother being subtle, it was a straight sales pitch. "I'll sell you fifteen dollars' worth for two dollars," he said.

"Cheap," said Tommy. "Maybe no good?"

"Milk sugar," I said.

He dug into his coat pocket. "Here, have a look. Put some on your tongue." There were two tiny paper packets in his hand and he gave them to Tommy. Tommy held them gingerly. "Looks neat," he said. The conviction in his voice was the conviction of a man who has just seen death. And right then, the plan completed itself in my head, as certain as the death Tommy held. I spoke up. "Listen, Pops, I've got money at my place. Come on with us and I'll pay you and we can all get high. We'll hop a cab."

Buster and Tommy stared at me, confused, but the old man seemed to like the idea. He'd murdered two junkies but he hadn't been there to see the hot shot hit and I could sense the excitement he was feeling at the thought of watching three junkies turn from wax to blue as the needle hit the vein. I was betting his caution would be swept away by the vision. I was right. "I'd like that!" he said quickly. And then suddenly his voice changed, became quiet, weary. "I'm tired. I'd like a place to sit down, too."

I hailed a cab and felt for the key in my pocket. I gave the driver the address of The Crow's apartment.

Once again, I was seated at The Crow's kitchen table. Buster and Tommy were on either side of me. The old man sat furthest from the door. Three little packets of junk were on the table. The old man said, "Aren't you going to take it?"

"Anticipation," I said. "It heightens the pleasure."

The old man said, "Oh."

"Why don't you take a shot?" I asked him. "You give us a deal like this, the least we can do is give you a taste."

"No," he said and his eyes swivelled from Buster to Tommy to me. "I don't take it."

Buster said loudly, "You just sell, is that it? You're a bargain-rate Santa to all the junkies in town, huh, Pop?"

His head went back and forth as though he were following a ping pong game. "I never take it, that's all. But you go right ahead. I don't mind." He was old; any of us could have handled him with one hand but I didn't want to toy with him. There was no pleasure in that. "Why did you do it?" I said.

His hands twisted in his lap and there was caution in his eyes. He smiled and said, "Why did I do what?"

"Kill junkies, that's what!" yelled Buster. He was on his feet and he cracked the old man across the mouth. Tommy leaped up and grabbed Buster from behind and I said, "Cool it. Busting him up won't solve anything." Tommy forced Buster back into a chair and said, "Right. No messing him up. Uncool. Square."

The old man rubbed his mouth but his voice was level and calm. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"We know you, Pop," I told him. "The word was out on what you looked like. The Crow told Buster here, and a kid in Brooklyn told Tommy. An old cat, they said, selling cut-rate and wearing a floppy black hat and a black raincoat. Nearly every junkie in town knows what you look like."

His wrinkled hands crawled over each other like small animals. His eyes burned and he wasn't afraid; he wanted to kill me.

"Buster and I saw The Crow get it yesterday," I went on. "He was sitting right here; he took the shot and didn't even get the needle out before he keeled over. It was sticking out of his arm. Know what I mean, Pop? I'll bet he was blue by the time we were calling the ambulance from the corner. And this kid in Brooklyn. This Edward. He thought he was getting a good deal. What was he thinking of his good deal when it hit? What was Edward thinking, Pop?"

His chair banged back against the wall.

He was across the table and his hands reached for me and his mouth worked on words he couldn't get out. Tommy and Buster carried him back to the chair. Tommy held him while Buster found some rope under the sink. They tied his arms to the back of the chair.

"Stay cool," Tommy said.

The words were coming now. "Junkie . . . junkies, damn you . . . scum of the earth . . . crawl-

ing slime . . ." His madness was plain, but there was also a cold fury that made me wince.

"You murdered my boy . . . you killed him and I'll kill all of you . . . I'll get you . . . I'll get every one of you . . ."

"Who killed your boy, Pop?" I asked.

"You!" and looked at me and "You!" and looked at Tommy and "You!" and looked at Buster. "All of you!" His eyes nailed the three of us to the wall.

"We didn't kill your kid," Buster said.

"How could I know what he was doing? He was bright, a good boy, how could I know? I couldn't know. But you people! You wouldn't help him. The police told me he'd taken too much and no one had helped him. Not his friends, not his junkie friends, they wouldn't even call a hospital. They could have done that at least. They left him in an alley instead. They took his clothes so they could sell them and they left him in an alley like some kind of animal. That's what you did . . . he was sick . . . you threw him out into an alley to die."

"No one I know did that," said Tommy.

Buster said, "I never heard that story."

The old man didn't hear. He shook his head angrily and said, "The police said they were doing what they could. For two years they told me that. But they weren't . . .

they didn't care. So I knew I had to be the one to find you . . . all you slime who murdered my boy!"

There was no sound in the room but the old man's breathing. Finally Tommy said, "Crazy. A crazy nut."

Buster looked at me. "He's not responsible. We'll call the fuzz. They'll take care of him."

Tommy nodded. "Lock him up. Ditch the key. Only way."

A smile turned up the corners of the old man's mouth.

"Is that junk poison?" I said and pointed to the three small white packages on the table.

"Take it and find out," he said.

"You got more of it where you live?" I asked.

"Maybe it's in a bus station locker. Maybe I have a secret place I won't tell you about. Sticks or stones or broken bones," he singsonged the last phrase. "Maybe there isn't any more and maybe there's lots more. All you animals may be dead in another day or so."

Buster shook his head in disgust. "Call the fuzz. I can't listen to this any more."

"Fuzz'll handle," said Tommy.

The smile turned to a grin and split the old man's face; a smart grin. "Prove I sold it to you. Have you seen me sell it to anybody but yourselves? No. I'm an old man, you addicts kidnapped me. That's your dope on the table and you're full of it and you're trying to accuse me of something. You're trying to say that I killed your friends. You did

it yourselves. I'll call for help." "No one in this building would pay any attention if you did," said Buster.

"Bugs," said Tommy.

"Call the man," said Buster.

I picked up the three envelopes of junk from the table and thought of the old man—the smart old man. I turned to Buster and Tommy. "We've got to kill him," I said.

I could see the words in headline-sized letters printed in their eyes. KILL HIM? MURDER? THAT'S THE CHAIR. KILL HIM? Hip Tommy shook his head. "What for? Uncool. Not smart."

I walked around the table and put my hands on the old man's shoulders. I felt his muscles stiffen. To Tommy and Buster I said, "He just told us what for. Our story is full of holes. It's our word against his that he was peddling. Nobody saw him sell to The Crow or Edward. Do we have enough on him that they won't let him out on bail so he can keep fixing more hot shots? What's two dead junkies? What's a live one to them? A junkie will say anything to get a fix."

The old man stared at us calmly.

"Look at him," I said. "He doesn't look crazy. He's an old man. What if they gave him a test and there wasn't any mention of junkies in it? Would he flip then? Maybe he'd sneak through. They wouldn't keep him in the can. I know they wouldn't."

"He's bugs," Tommy said.

"I'm not killing anybody," Buster said. "Not even him. He's crazy; you can't kill a crazy man."

"We'll give him an overdose," I said. "I'll use my own stuff. It'll look like some cat who knew The Crow was using his place to fix. Had a key. Just took too much, that's all. An anonymous friend called the fuzz and said that an addict had taken an overdose. We'd be in the clear!"

"No murder," said Tommy. "Been junkie all my life. But not murderer."

"He's killing us! He's killing every junkie in town! We have to protect ourselves!"

"I don't want anything to do with it. I'm clean," said Buster.

"You're a fink," I said.

"I'm clean, that's all," said Buster.

Beneath my hands, the old man's shoulders shook. He was chuckling. "Rats, all of you," he said. "You're scared, you junkies. Noguts. You run, that's all, always running. Sticks and stones and broken bones." The sing song and then the laughter.

"He makes me sick," said Buster. "We can leave him here. We won't ever buy from him again."

"But the pushers. They might."

"That's their problem."

"It's ours!"

"You can't kill a crazy person," said Buster.

"No murder," said Tommy. "Not that rap."

Down in the junk jungle (as the newspapers call it), there was a madman working out his own private vendetta. Whether we took him in to the fuzz or not, he'd manage to kill more before they finally caught him at it. How many of my first-name friends were going to cop out with a hot shot in their arms? I didn't owe them anything. I didn't like that many of them, but just as I didn't want a shot of strychnine, neither did I want them to have that final taste. Scuffling and living was hard enough. We all had the monkey squatting on our shoulders, we didn't need the crazy man too.

"I'll do it myself," I told them.

Buster and Tommy got up from their chairs. Buster said. "Remember, I'm clean!"

Tommy tried to stare me down; then he said, "Both bugs."

They walked to the door and looked back at me, at the old man, now crooning to himself in the chair. "I won't stop you, but it's your deal," said Buster.

"Your murder. Your rap," said Tommy.

I nodded. "My rap. My deal."

As soon as the door closed, I took the three small bags of strychnine from the table, tore them open over the sink and washed the stuff down the drain. Then I took my good bags out and fixed them on the table in front of the old man.

"You're slime," he said. "I'm not afraid of slime."

"We just try to get along, Pop."

"You're rotten. You killed my boy."

"I didn't kill your boy."

"You killed my boy. You!"

My spike sucked up the last of the fix; I got all the air out and knelt by the old man. He wouldn't look at me and he didn't struggle. He stared straight ahead. I pulled off his belt and rolled up his sleeve. I cinched the belt tight on his arm and the vein came up big and strong.

"You hate me like you hated my boy and I'm not afraid," he said. His voice didn't shake and I knew he wasn't going to crack. That made it easier for both of us. "I'm not frightened of junkies," he said.

"I know you're not."

"You hate me."

"I don't hate you."

He wasn't looking when I pushed the needle into the vein and he didn't wince when I jammed the plunger down and sent the overdose heading for his heart. I took the spike out and dabbed the arm with alcohol. "I don't hate anyone," I whispered but he couldn't hear, his head was back, his eyes rolled up, his mouth open. I stood up quickly and went to the window. I stood with my back to him and looked out into the three a.m. blackness.

Behind me was his labored breathing. When it stopped and I turned around, he was dead. In death his face was neither full of hate nor anguished; it was the face

of a peaceful old man. Untying the rope, I let his head down gently on the table. I stretched his arm out before him the way The Crow's had been. I went back to the window and tossed the rope out, an extra precaution because there had been no rope burns on his arms. On the way to the door, I dropped the key on the table. To make it easier for the fuzz after I made my phone call, I left the door open a little.

It was all over.

For one flight of stairs, I felt serene, emptied, quiet. Then I heard the sirens.

Who were they for? A nighttime prowler trapped on a rooftop? Another junkie caught in the cold sweating terror of withdrawal or overdose? A desperate hustler framed in the harsh lights of the

prowl car as he stood over the beaten body of a drunk?

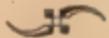
For me?

Then it must have been Buster, youthful, idealistic Buster, one foot still in his square Brooklyn world, who'd told the fuzz that one animal was killing another animal and wouldn't the Animal Rescue League please hurry to the rescue.

The sirens cut the night.

I didn't ditch my spike and I wouldn't run. I eased down the stairs and thought of the statement I would make to the fuzz and the newspapers. After all, I'd tell them, junkies deserve law and order too. A hot shot is the junkie form of capital punishment and I was head of the committee to abolish it. Of course, I had to kill to do it.

I hoped I could make the street.



SPOT OF COLOR

BY EDITH FITZGERALD GOLDEN

*Life was bleak and frugal on the sheep ranch, the country cold white
and harsh black. Maggie yearned for just one . . .*



MAGGIE had the breakfast ready, when Ernest came from the barn with the foaming pail of milk. He set the pail on the work bench in the corner, beside the crocks and strainer, and sat down at the white, oil-cloth covered table.

Maggie hurried to dish up the thick, fried pork and gravy, the fried potatoes, the rice, warmed over from the night before, and looked at them with a faint feeling of sickness at the back of her throat. Seemed like there was something lacking in the plate of food. There ought to be something with color.

Something red, or green, or yellow. Something besides white. Even the dishes were a thick white, not even a flower or a leaf on them. Ernest had bought them in town, as he bought everything for the house and sheep ranch.

The food looked tasteless, colorless, but it was the kind Ernest liked, so it was the kind that Maggie cooked for him, day in, day out.

She put the plate of food before him, and poured coffee into the thick, white cups, before she turned away, to strain the milk. She didn't want to watch him eat, this morning. Ernest ate greedily, with snuffling noises, like the dog, Bart, muzzling his food, and his sandy moustache hung over his mouth, sometimes getting in his way. Bits of gravy and potato clung to his moustache.

Maggie found herself staring down into the crock of milk. White,

like everything else. White—or black. Everything in the kitchen. Black, or white. From the worn, square patterned black and white linoleum on the floor, past the black iron cook stove, to the shot gun that Ernest kept against thieves, hanging on the white painted wall, over the trap door leading to the cellar.

If only there was some color, somewhere! Something besides black and white! She would go crazy—never seeing anything but black and white!

Through the window, she could see a few snowflakes, beginning to fall white, more white. The snow would cover everything. . . . The whole world would be white . . . the whole world.

Winter was closing in. White winter.

She thought, if only she could have some cocoa—to put in the white milk, make it a nice creamy brown. It would taste so good, too. She hadn't tasted cocoa for so long.

Ernest finished his breakfast, crossed his knife and fork at the back of the plate; he wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and pushed back his chair.

He had not spoken.

Maggie's words came with a rush: "Ernest, when you going to town again . . . ?"

He deliberated, feeling in the pocket of his wamus, for his pipe. His tobacco sack hung limply from his fingers, nearly empty.

"Best go today, before weather gets worse. Need salt for sheep. . . ."

Maggie put down the cup of coffee she had poured for herself. "Then I'll write down what we need." She flew for pencil and paper from the corner cupboard.

"We better get plenty," she said. "Looks like a storm coming."

Ernest took his sheep-skin-lined coat and cap with ear muffs from the wooden peg along the wall.

"Yeah. . . . That's what Sol Mingo said yesterday."

Maggie's hand stopped over the white paper.

"Sol . . . ? Where'd you see him?"

"Stopped by the sheep barn yesterday."

"I wisht I'd seen him," said Maggie. "I'd ask how all his folks was. Grandma, Aunt Nellie. Must be two, three years, since I seen any of 'em . . . Did he say how they was?"

"He didn't say." Ernest put on his cap and coat and went out.

Maggie wrote hurriedly: beans, flour, sugar, salt, soda and rice. She wrote tobacco, although this wasn't really necessary. Ernest would remember tobacco.

Maybe, if there was enough money . . . she wrote "cocoa" at the bottom of the list, and drew a line under it. She thought how good it would taste, hot, creamy brown, fragrantly delicious. She closed her eyes, almost tasting it, and her mouth watered.

Quickly, then, before Ernest could hitch the team to the wagon

and come to the house, Maggie ran to the little cold, dark bed room, and drew from underneath a pile of underwear, in a bottom drawer, some old postal cards, already written upon, and stamped. They were addressed to various seed houses in the middle west, and were all the same:

"Dear Sir: Please send me your new spring seed catalogue, in color, and oblige, Yours truly, Mrs. Ernest Miller."

She hurried back to the kitchen, just as Ernest came to the house. She threw a shawl around her shoulders, and ran outside. She didn't want to keep him waiting.

"Here's the list, Ernest. I wrote cocoa, at the bottom." She handed the list up to him, as he sat in the high seat of the wagon. There was a jag of hay in the wagon bed, for the horses. It was an over night trip to town, 20 miles away. Ernest himself would sleep in the livery stable, that night. "I been so hungry for something different, you know, Ernest? Please be sure to get it, will you, Ernest? It won't be very much. . . ."

He grunted, and gathered up the reins.

"Oh, and Ernest—don't go, just yet . . . here are some post cards I want you to be sure to mail, at the Post Office. It's right beside the store, you know, and it won't take but a minute. They are all stamped and everything."

He took the cards and thrust

them into the side pocket of his coat. He clucked to the team of gray horses.

Maggie stepped back and looked up at Ernest. She ran a step or two, to keep up with the wagon, as the wheels began turning.

"Some time, Ernest, sometime . . . can I go along to town with you . . . ?"

The man turned an astonished face toward her. His small eyes, under the shaggy brows, stared as though he could not have heard correctly.

"Whatever for?" he asked, thunderstruck. "Don't I fetch everything? Ain't you got everything you need?"

Maggie twisted her fingers in the fringe of the shawl. "Seems as if I'd like to go to town, once," she faltered. "Seems as if I'd like to see some people, and talk to them."

"Why, we ain't got time for such," he said, reprovingly. "What with all the work—and that new grazing land to pay for—somebody's got to stay here; I done the chores for today. . . ."

"Seems like I just got to see people," said Maggie, desperately.

"Whatever for?" He looked back at her.

"I just got to, seems like." But the wagon was moving on, down the lane, and out to the highway. Maggie stood looking after it, until it became smaller and smaller, in the wide expanse of the prairie. Finally, it became a speck, moving on

toward the horizon, and then vanished completely.

Slowly, she went back into the kitchen. She washed the dishes, swept the floor, made the bed. She wished she had a sewing machine. Then maybe she could order some yard goods from a mail order house, and make herself some flowered curtains, or a pretty apron. But she knew there could be no thought of a sewing machine for her—or anything else—until the new land was paid for. Maybe not even then. Seemed like there was always something needed for the sheep ranch.

She took a pan of scraps out to feed Bart, the dog. She wished he would be friends with her, but he was clearly Ernest's dog, and Ernest had forbidden her to make any overtures toward the animal.

"I want him to be *mean*, and full of fight," he had said. "I aim to beat him once in a while, kick him around some. Learn him not to trust strangers—'case any thieves bother around the sheep—or anyone comes"

"Who'd come?" asked Maggie.

Now, Bart growled deep in his throat, and showed his teeth, and watched Maggie with small red eyes. He backed away as she put the pan of food beside the step, and watched her walk back to the house.

"You needn't worry," Maggie told the dog. "I ain't even going to try to pat you, anymore."

She stood, looking down at the dry, withered stalks of three marigolds, beside the house. They had never bloomed. Ernest said they couldn't spare water for such foolishness as flowers, that you couldn't eat or make use of, some way.

Maggie addressed the brown stalks: "You poor things," she said, "you never got to bloom. . . ."

She sat by the kitchen stove, in her old padded rocking chair, creaking as it rocked. She looked around her clean kitchen, and at the pile of wood behind the stove. There didn't seem to be much to do. It was kind of nice to know she wouldn't have to cook a big noon meal. Potatoes, gravy, bread. She'd just have a bite, after while. Catch as catch can. She'd cook a big meal tomorrow, when Ernest came home.

After while she'd get up and go fetch water, and more wood, and milk the cow. Before dark. Because, after dark, there was something she wanted to do . . . right now, she'd set a spell. . . .

At noon, she got up and heated the coffee, left over from breakfast, and ate some bread and apple sauce. For supper, she decided to have a baked potato.

She did the chores early, and went back to the kitchen. Tonight, she'd light the coal-oil lamp early. The soft, mellow light would make of the kitchen, a soft, cozy place. She would put extra wood in the stove, and even open the door into

the cold bed room, so some of the heat could go in there.

She ate her supper and washed the few dishes, then fed Bart. She had looked to the sheep and done the milking.

She went into the bedroom, and into the one closet. At the back, under a pile of old quilts, stood her small work trunk.

She opened it, and took out a yellowed box, tied with a string, and carried it back to the kitchen. She sat in her rocking chair, holding the box on her scrawny knees, and untied the string; her knotted fingers trembling as she lifted the lid of the box, laid it aside.

There was a yellowed paper on top. The programme of the Senior High School Graduation Prom. The year Maggie had graduated. How long ago? She tried to remember. The date came on a fold of the programme, and was quite faded away.

It seemed so long ago!

When she and Ernest were married, the year after graduation, he had been a silent, taciturn sort of a boy. They had started housekeeping in a small house near the shoe factory, where he worked. There had been a small garden patch in the back, and a tiny square front porch to sit on, on a summer evening. There was some shiny new golden oak furniture, (ten dollars down, a dollar a week), flowered wall paper, and gaily colored cushions on the parlor sofa. Maggie had

the old cook book that had belonged to her mother, and she loved her little kitchen, in blue and yellow, with yellow mixing bowls.

Then Ernest's Uncle died, and left him the sheep farm out west, and Ernest said they might as well go out and have a look at it. After they made the trip out west, he said they might as well stay awhile and look after things.

They stayed on, in spite of Maggie's protests. What was the use, he asked, of paying rent, spending his life working in a shoe factory, when he had a ranch of his own now to look after?

Maggie, set down in the midst of the wide prairie, with no neighbors for miles, tried to adjust to a new way of life; a life of loneliness. Ernest became absorbed by the land, spent all his time working on the land, tending sheep, building fences, digging a water hole. He became more silent, more withdrawn.

The days stretched into years. For a time, Maggie thought she might have a child. Something to love, something to take the curse from the loneliness. But as the years passed, and no child came, she knew, when she came to a certain age, that there would be no child.

Once, though, there had been a little yellow kitten, with a white front paw, and a white bib. She found it outside her door, one winter morning, starving, limping, foot-sore, looking at her with big, hun-

gry, topaz eyes . . . God only knew where it had come from . . . Maggie thought it had been *sent* to her, by some mysterious power, to relieve her loneliness.

She brought it in by the stove, warmed and fed the little thing, and cuddled it in her arms. It grew sleek and plump, and followed her about, purring, and rubbing against her thin legs.

One morning, when she took the saucer of milk to the accustomed place beside the kitchen steps, the kitten did not come.

She called, "Kitty! Kitty!" and went all around the yard, and barnyard, peering behind the woodpile, into the open door of the shadowy barn, but no little yellow streak came running, meowing, to her. Ernest, busy feeding the horses, paid no attention to her calling.

When he came to the house for breakfast, Maggie, distressed, asked: "Have you seen my kitten this morning?"

Ernest paused, with a fork of bread, dripping gravy, half way to his mouth.

"I knocked it in the head and threw it over the fence."

"But why . . . ?" cried Maggie, "Ernest, *why?*"

"Why? Why we can't have anything around that don't earn its keep, can we? Any fool ought to know that. It was drinking too much milk."

Maggie stared at him. For a wild

moment she wondered if *she* was to get sick, become bed-ridden, unable to work, if Ernest would knock *her* in the head and throw *her* over the fence.

After he finished breakfast, Maggie, who did not feel like breakfast this morning, went out to the fence and found the body of the yellow kitten. She carried it into the house and sat in her chair by the stove, holding it; it seemed to her that the kitten's elfin face had a faint look of surprise, as though wondering why anyone would do such a thing to him.

After a while Maggie went to a corner of the yard and scooped out a hole in the hard earth, for a grave, and buried the kitten, wrapped in a clean piece of an old pillow slip. She laid a stone on top to mark the spot.

After that she didn't seem to find much to say to Ernest. They were two people in the same house, on the same land, that was all. Maggie cooked and sewed, scrubbed, washed and ironed. Fought the dry dust in summer, the dark cold in winter. Every day was the same. Ernest spent the days, and sometimes part of the nights, on the land, coming in to eat and sleep. Sometimes days went by without a word being spoken.

Maggie too, had fallen silent.

But tonight, as she sat alone in the kitchen, she began to talk aloud. It was good to hear the sound of a voice, in the evening by the fire,

even her own. Ernest, she knew, would say she was crazy, if he could hear her.

"And *this* is the yearbook, the year I graduated. That's me, there, in the white embroidered dress, with the big bow of ribbon on my hair. Would you believe it?" She gazed a long time at the picture of the smiling, dark haired girl.

"I can't hardly believe it's me," she said. The girl in the picture had hair as dark as the wing of a crow, and sparkling blue eyes. Maggie put her hand up to her thin cheek. She never looked in the narrow spotted bedroom mirror any more. What was the use? She *knew* how she looked, with the thin, gray-streaked hair, raked up from a lean neck, the eyes lustreless. . . .

She looked again at the picture. She'd had some sweet smelling powder once, and even a little pot of rouge, which she kept carefully hidden from her aunt. It was called, "Rosaleen." It had been a lovely color, too. Sort of a rose red. Lovely, lovely color.

She put the year book away, and took out a flat, tissue paper wrapped package. It contained the corsage she had worn to the Senior Prom, pressed flat. Dry and brittle, ready to fall into dust, all color gone.

It had been red, she remembered. Red roses, tied with picot-edged silver ribbon. The ribbon was tarnished, now. . . .

She thought of the boy who had

sent her the roses, the lovely, beautiful red roses.

Lovely, lovely red.

She folded the paper thin flowers into the tissue paper wrapping, and put them in the box. Next, she took out a small pink lace and feather fan, unfolding it gently, carefully . . . it *might* fall apart . . . if she wasn't careful.

She held it before her face, letting only her eyes show over the edge, as she had done the night she went to the prom. . . . Oh, that had been a lovely time! Her aunt, who'd raised her, had never permitted Maggie to have a date before. And the boy, seeing her to the door, had looked so handsome in his dark coat, white trousers, and bow tie! So dashing and romantic! He had even reminded her, a little, of Valentino . . .

And the boy had kissed her—actually kissed her! A quick, embarrassed boyish kiss on the cheek—but a *kiss!*

The only kiss Maggie ever had.

Because the boy, whose name was Perkins, went to war not long afterward. A German shell found him in the Argonne.

Then came Ernest, who didn't go in for kissing, or any other form of endearment. The aunt, who was growing old, feeble, and somewhat addled, wanted to see Maggie married off to some good steady man, before she passed on. Before Maggie hardly knew it, she and Ernest were married.

She put the fan back in the box, and put the box away in the trunk. She wouldn't look at the things again, until Ernest was gone, somewhere. He would think she was crazy.

She banked the fire, braided her thin hair into a sort of rat tail, washed her hands and face, and put on her long-sleeved, high-necked gown. Before crawling into bed, under the rough covers, she opened the door a crack, and peered out. Snowflakes were still coming down.

Tomorrow, Ernest would be back . . . with the lovely, brown cocoa, that would taste so good. She had written it there, right on the bottom of the list. How good it would taste! It would be something *different!* And in just a few weeks there would be the lovely seed catalogues—*in color!* With the lovely, bright flower pictures, to feast her eyes on . . .

She closed her eyes in visions of unutterable delight, seeing petunias, marigolds, zinnias, in a gorgeous profusion of color, running along the garden fence.

In the morning she built up the fire and made breakfast. She hurried to milk the cow, feed the chickens, feed Bart. The chores were quickly done.

She went to stand by the kitchen window, watching for the speck to appear, far off, on the rim of the prairie. The snow had stopped falling in the night. There was a vast,

unbroken white blanket covering the world, Maggie's world, all that she could see.

She could feel her heart beating with pleasurable anticipation. The cocoa . . . the flowers, in color . . . soon, soon. Her head ached a little, from a feeling of intense eagerness, and she put a hand up to the back of her neck, and rubbed it.

The speck was coming back. Maggie watched it coming, a dot on the horizon. The speck came nearer, became a wagon, team, man. Maggie's hands were strained tightly together. She ran outside and waited, quivering, for Ernest to draw the wagon to a stop before the step.

He climbed down from the wagon, and lifted down a box of groceries, and set it on the step.

"You see anybody in town?" asked Maggie. Her eyes were fastened on the box.

Ernest grunted, climbed back in the wagon, chucked to the team.

Maggie dragged the box inside, and kneeling on the floor, began to remove the contents.

Flour, sugar, salt, rice, beans. Soda and baking powder. Yeast. She took them all out, and came to the bottom of the box.

She did not find the cocoa, so she looked through all the bags and boxes again, felt in the bottom of the empty box. . . .

The cocoa was not there.

Maggie sat staring at the empty box. Her head ached, and there was

a queer buzzing sound in her ears.

She was still sitting on the floor, beside the empty box, with the groceries on the floor around her, when Ernest came to the house. He hung his sheepskin-lined cap on a peg behind the door.

"Ain't dinner ready?" He looked at her, frowning.

Maggie sat very still. Only her eyes moved, following Ernest's hands as he reached in the pocket of his coat, and took out a fresh sack of tobacco.

"Ernest . . . you—forgot my co-coa."

"Cocoa? Oh, well, guess I was in a hurry. Worried about the sheep. We don't need it, nohow." He reached in the pocket for his pipe.

Something fell to the floor. He glanced down.

"Guess I forgot to mail them cards. . . . Guess they ain't important, anyhow." Having filled his pipe to his satisfaction, Ernest struck a match and lit it. He took a pleasurable puff.

"Got a calendar, though." He felt in his other pocket, drew out a large square, white envelope, and gave it to her. "Here . . ."

Maggie took it. A calendar. A picture. She would have a picture to put on the wall!

She took the calendar out of the envelope and looked at it.

Then Maggie came up off of the floor, and the gun on the wall had come down from the wall, and was in her hands.

Ernest, after one stunned look at her, dropped his pipe, wrenched open the door and made a flying leap outside.

A million orange lights exploded inside Maggie's head. The flying figure stopped in mid air, fell, and rolled over once.

Slowly, Maggie lowered the gun. She walked over the calendar that showed a picture of a snow scene, in black and white, and went outdoors.

She stood, looking down at the beautiful red ribbon of color slowly widening in the snow.





“H” RUN

A
Novelette

BY
ALEX PONG

The day was bright, cloudless and clean. And Anna was back aboard, stretched out on the bunk below. But he knew of the heroin hidden in the oil filter . . . and the knowledge lay like a wriggling foul tumor in his gut.

ALL THE way back to the boat I kept wondering how it would seem without Anna. I would park the car on the side of the street opposite the docks. (Standard operational procedure.) I would lock the doors and walk across the street, down the stairs to the floating docks and along dock 1-B until I was standing beside the boarding ladder of the Pelican. Also S.O.P. I would reach up and grab the top rung quickly pulling myself up on deck.

S.O.P. I would go below and walk forward. I would find Anna reading a book or snoozing on her bunk. I would put a finger underneath her chin and tilt her face up.

Not tonight. Tonight the standard operational procedure was undergoing a change. No Anna. I sat in the car a long time before getting out and I kept telling myself that she would not be there . . . but deep inside I couldn't really believe it.

Then the minute I set foot on deck my footfalls had a strangely hollow ring as though the Pelican had been robbed of her soul. Her white paint was unchanged, her hull as tight and sound as ever but I could have sworn I could hear a difference.

I looked up at the moon before going below and when I went forward hope died. The stove was cold. The galley in order. Not a trace of former activity. There would be no supper warming for me in the oven. I looked slowly around and felt my shoulders slump. I sat on her bunk thinking and believing for the first time. "By God the little bitch has really left me."

There was one piece of chocolate pie left. I ate that for supper and lit a fire under the kettle. I stood staring moodily at the stove. I couldn't remember ever feeling so alone, angry, and hurt.

For a moment I had the very unmasculine urge to cry but I was too angry, not at Anna, but at myself and everything in general and any tears would have been as phony as my so called charter business.

I dumped the pie plate in the sink and went back up through the wheelhouse. I looked up at the flying bridge and crossed the deck to the boarding ladder. Craning my head around to see past another boat I saw that there was a light in Riverman's office. I jumped down on the dock.

Hale Riverman must have been nearly as big around as I was tall, and a half a foot shorter. I shut the office door behind me, my sneakers squeaking on the cracked and dirty lineoleum as I crossed to the rickety overstuffed couch.

Hale's eyes, beady brown dots buried deep in the folds of his face, watched me, rolling in their sockets like small glass marbles. He had the coldest eyes of anyone I knew. He sniffed through his beaklike nose and returned the mug of beer to his desk. I wondered that the old oak swivel chair had not collapsed long ago. It creaked as he let out a deep breath and swiveled slowly around. "Ah hah. So the little woman is gone."

I nodded.

He shrugged and a hundred pounds of fat twitched slightly. "I would offer you a beer my friend but you know as well as I do where it is and I . . ." His voice trailed off and he shrugged again.

I got up and went back between a row of dirty brown crates to a tired GE refrigerator that whirred noisily into the night. I took out a can and poked around in the sink for an opener. Finally I used a screw driver. I went back and sat down.

He squinted. "You don't look so good my friend. So, there are more fish in the ocean."

"Not like Anna."

He laughed a hoarse throaty laugh that was more of a snort.

"No. I should say not and thank goodness for that."

"Anna was a good girl Hale."

"Yes." He folded his arms across his huge expanse of belly. "My daughter behave like she did and I whip her so she can't sit down for months."

"YOU have a daughter."

"Sure and I got wife too." He shook his head slowly. "Anna was no good my friend. These dark eyed blondes . . ." He shook his head again. "That man . . . what is his name?"

"Mansfield?"

"Yes. He has bit off more than he can chew." He paused. "And it serves him right. Little men like him never get very far."

Hale Riverman was just about the last person I felt like confiding in or telling my troubles to but there wasn't anybody else and I just had to say it. "I loved her. I still do. I can't give her up."

Hale unfolded his arms and made the wavy motions with his hands that are used only to describe voluptuous women. Then he moved them straight up and down a few inches apart. He shook his head sadly. "Not for you Carl. For some little runt maybe but not for you." He moved his eyes expressively towards the ceiling. "You are a big man. You need a woman like . . ." he made the wavy motions with his hands again. "Not a beanpole."

A beanpole was she? Perhaps. I could visualize her in an instant.

She was thin. Very thin, like models work so hard to be, but she had a big solid frame and sitting on the fore-deck in an afternoon sun in green pedal pushers and red cardigan her sun bleached hair rippling in the wind she could have made any one of Hales big brassy types look bad. She was a goddess and she knew it. And I knew it.

Hale abruptly changed the subject. "The oil needed changing on your left engine. I took the liberty of doing it while you were gone today." He winked broadly.

I stood up and walked over to the door, but I had no intentions of leaving. I was restless and couldn't sit still. I glared through the screening at the Pelican. A trip to Mexico would do me good. Maybe later I would take the boat out for a short cruise in the moonlight. I had to do something. I wondered at how I had managed to go for a week without going crazy. Everywhere I looked I could see Anna. For a second I was sure I could see her standing on the deck beckoning in that special way. I spun around and went back to the couch. I would have to keep busy. As I had for the past few days supervising the construction of the new boat. The Pelican II. Forty-seven and a half feet of twin diesel powered cruiser. Heavier than the forty-two foot Pelican but faster and sturdier.

"I suppose I'll soon have to go to Mexico and have oil filter trouble." I paused. "When do I go?"

Hale stared up at the ceiling and watching him I couldn't figure out why someone with so much money would want to live as he did. He must have been worth over two million. I thought of the trip to Mexico and the return trip with the dummy oil filter chock full of H. I would get thirty-five hundred for the trip, not even a tenth of what my cargo was worth but it was an easy way of making thirty-five hundred. It was better than starving as an honest but poor charter boat operator with no business. I wondered if Hale had been partly responsible for making sure that I could not make it as a legitimate operator. It was more than likely, but fighting them would have been a fools notion. You took what life threw your way and liked it. I wished that I could feel that way about Anna, but I couldn't. All I could feel was a deep ache in my chest.

Hale looked back at me. "If you leave early tomorrow morning you should get there in plenty of time."

"No businessmen hiring me for a fishing trip?"

He shook his head. "All you have to do is pick one up. In Mexico."

"Am I gassed?"

"Naturally."

I got up and walked to the door and back. Then I sat down again. He pursed his lips and shook his head. "There are more pebbles on the beach. There are always more birds in the sky."

I glared back at him. "How do

you know you can trust me any more. Without Anna it's like I lost my anchor. Nothing has any point to it any more." I was talking like a slob, and a slob was the last thing I wanted to be in front of Hale, but I couldn't help it. "I don't give a damn about anything any more. I might get careless and get caught."

Hale shrugged. "Take care to see that you don't."

"What if I don't." I said recklessly.

"The police will probably shoot you by accident while you are trying to escape."

"Escape's the last thing I'd think of."

Hale smiled a broad smile that could have been carved on the face of an iceberg. "Oh but you would my friend. When my compatriots are caught they are always killed trying to escape. It is very sad. The police around here are very good marksmen."

In case I had forgotten, Hale was reminding me that once you got in you never backed out. "I'll try to have a completely uneventful trip."

"That is the way it will be then." His attempt at being fatherly was hideous. "I have a number you can call." He winked. "Anna you will soon forget. I give you my personal guarantee."

"Not with that kind of woman I won't." Any one other than Anna didn't interest me. It was as though she'd cut out my heart.

"Ah. She is not the kind you are

thinking of Carl. This one. She never works for less than one hundred a night."

"I'll spend my money on other things first."

"No. I will take care of any expenses myself. I feel generous tonight."

I stood up. It seemed suddenly stuffy. I had to get some air. "I'm going for a ride. See if everything's ship shape."

He moved his hands. "I wish I was your age. The offer is still open."

I wondered how long I would have to live if I hit him. "No thanks. She wouldn't interest me if she were making a thousand a night."

I cast off and the Pelican's soft rumble was more comforting than any woman could ever have been. I headed out for open sea where for a little while I could be thoroughly alone. Out there Hale and his henchmen had little hold on me. As long as I stayed far enough off shore the police could not touch me either, but it wasn't them I had to get away from. It was just people, the deceitful conniving mass of humanity clotted behind the breakwater, the filth and the rottenness that had taken my Anna from me. But then could I complain. I was little better than the rest of them just because I didn't LIKE what I was doing. Maybe they didn't like some of the things they did either.

The breeze and waves slapping at the Pelican seemed to be crying

"H" RUN

Anna, Anna, Anna. I wanted to join in the chorus but I only whispered her name. Even out where no one could hear I couldn't cry out the way I wanted to, perhaps shed a tear or two. I kept thinking of Mansfield, three inches shorter than me and fifty pounds lighter, black haired and suave. He hated the sea. He was a slob. What on earth did Anna see in him. Money? Anna couldn't be a slave to money, not my Anna, but yet this very night she would be sleeping with him. Finally I screamed into the night. "DAMN DAMN DAMN!"

Hale's light was out when I tied up again. I wasn't sleepy but I was tired enough and my mind numbed enough to get a little. I fell asleep sometime in the wee hours but it was only a light half sleep, or so it seemed. I would open one eye every little while and look at the clock, but perhaps later I drifted off into a deeper sleep.

I had thought that I would be too tired to dream but I soon heard the Pelican creak against the bumpers as someone came over the side and the soft rustle of fabric as some one came carefully down below. Then I could feel Anna's hand against my cheek with a touch as soft as the kiss of the dew, cool as an ocean breeze. I reached out and took hold of it softly muttering her name. Part of me knew I was dreaming and I didn't want to wake up. Ever. But the sound of my own voice must have wakened me. I opened

my eyes and told myself that I was still dreaming, that it was the strange feeling one gets when dreaming of sleep and other dreams. The pressure on the side of the bunk seemed so real as she sat. I sat up suddenly. "Anna!"

My arms went around her with the quick exhalation from my lungs. My hands lost themselves in her hair and I was whispering the beauty of her name over and over. Her lips were cool, soft, and compliant. We broke apart and with one hand she pulled back the blankets. I heard the quiet bump of her shoes being dropped on the floor.

"Anna, my love, you've come back."

She twisted out of her sweater, the blood red cardigan. I reached up and unpinned her hair as she slipped in beside me. I crushed her against me searching for her lips and then I thought of Mansfield not even as tall as herself, his oily yellow skin and milk white teeth of dental acrylics, and I went rigid. I stopped before I found her mouth and turned my back on her feeling suddenly on fire. I sat up and swung my feet out so that I was sitting on the edge of the bunk. "What the hell happened to Mansfield?"

"What about him?" She had my heart in her hands. She was mauling it, slashing it with her perfectly manicured nails. Then she lay there quietly watching it bleed.

Mansfield had to wear a corset.

A god-damned girdle. I'd seen it once under his shirt. Take it off and his belly probably looked like Hale's. I felt sick. I didn't want to think about it, but I could see the folds of sloppy white flesh spreading over Anna's lean lithe suntanned body. I cracked my knuckles. "Get out of here Anna. Don't ever come back."

She said nothing. I stood up and turned so that I could look down at her. The moon shone through the porthole on her face and she looked exactly as she had on the night I met her. "Do you really want me to go Carl."

I turned my back and shook my head. "God no. I love you. But get out of here anyway before I hit you."

"I've been hit before." She was taunting me. I knew I couldn't look at her and then hit her. "Go ahead Carl. Hit me. I deserve it." I looked over my shoulder. She had crooked one arm and her head was resting on her hand. She was smiling slightly.

It was a stupid question but I had to ask it. "Did you sleep with him Anna."

"What else do women do with men."

The crack of my hand against her face was like an explosion in the night. She looked up at me dry eyed. "Don't you want to know how he was. He was terrific. Sure he's a sloppy hunk of flesh but he knows more about how to love a

woman than you'll ever learn in a thousand years."

"Get out of here before I kill you."

She didn't move. "God he was good Carl."

"But he wasn't enough. You have to get it from more than one man a night." She said nothing but at least the mocking smile was gone.

"He had these little electric vibrators that he held in his hands Carl. He even had some that he straps on the sides of his thighs. It drives you wild."

I screamed at her. "For God's sake stop it." Immediately I wondered if I had waked Hale. I glared at her. Then I hit her again. She turned her face towards me smiling again. "I want you to hear it all Carl. Aren't you going to ask me why I came back."

"Why?" I snarled with a half sob.

"He slapped me too. He hit me Carl, with all the strength he had."

"You'd better get out of here before I hit you with everything I've got." I took out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter and lit up.

"You've got more wallop in your little finger than he's got in his whole right arm." She said to my back. I heard her throw the blanket back and the soft sound of her feet hitting the floor. Then she was behind me her arms around my waist and I wished that I had on more than my shorts. Her fingers traced the ridges of my stomach muscles. "He has a few things to learn too

Carl. It wasn't really any good. It was all like those teeth of his. It was good while it lasted but afterwards I felt sick because I knew it was all a fake." She cupped her fingers over my chest muscles. "I couldn't help feeling just a little sick with him on me Carl. It was like a warm wet blanket. His flesh flows over you like greasy gelatin." She withdrew her hands and put them on the tops of my shoulders. "It wasn't like with you Carl. Making love to you is like making love to Rhino." She put her arms around my waist and pulled herself up against me. I could feel her hair and her cheek against my back. It was a warmth spreading slowly over me, down towards my loins. "Forgive me Carl. Please."

I pulled her arms away from me and went up on deck. I smoked the cigarette down until the butt was burning my fingers. Then I took one last drag and flicked it overboard. It hissed as it hit the water. I knew I should order her off the boat. It was all over. It was as dead as the little white butt floating in the black oiliness of the water. I went below. She was standing with her back to me looking out the forward porthole. My eyes were dry and I kept wondering why I had the inane wish to cry. I came up behind her and slipping my hands between her arms to cup her breasts pulled her gently towards me.

"I hear you're going to Mexico tomorrow." She whispered.

My chin was against the top of her head. I nodded.

"Take me with you?"

"I couldn't go without you."

She turned. "Oh Carl."

"Anna." I said.

We fell on the bunk.

Later I said. "Anna darling, What do I have to do to keep you."

She moved her hand up and down my back. "You have such nice muscles darling. Are we going to Mexico for H?"

I felt myself tighten. "You were never supposed to know."

"I'm not stupid Carl. Why do men always think women are stupid?"

"I didn't ever think you were stupid. I just overestimated my own intelligence. When did you know?"

She moved slowly against me and took her arms from around me. Then she turned on her back and stared up at the ceiling. I put my hand on her breast. She reached up and touched my hand. "It was obvious you weren't making so much from the businessmen. Most of them never fished anyway. After the fourth trip I watched when Pete came on board to check the oil filter."

"But . . ."

"He thought I was asleep. Hale should fire him. He's not very careful."

"Why didn't you tell me. I thought you didn't know."

I felt sick Carl. I never felt so sick in my life. One minute I was just a starved underpaid model trying to

make a living and then at a party I run into you. It happens like in a fairy tale. I'm on cloud nine and then bang I find I'm married to a dope runner. I wanted to puke every time I saw you."

"Was it that bad?"

"That bad."

"I'm sorry Anna. You put on a good show. I guess I'm just a stupid clod. I never knew. Is that why. . . ?"

"I started running around with other men? Yes. One after another. I knew I had to get away from you. Then I ran into Don Mansfield. He had money. He was good looking in a greasy sort of way and he had charm. I thought I was set, but I guess I'm just good at finding the wrong kind of man. He has three houses. He stocks them with teen-age girls. It's the standard thing. He tells them he's a talent scout from Hollywood. One thing leads to another, a little blackmail and before they know it it's too late."

"I'm sorry Anna." I reached up and traced the line of her jaw. "I'll make it up to you. Just tell me how."

She sighed and kissed me quickly. "You don't need to do anything Carl. None of them were like you. I guess you're my man. I need you. I've gotten kind of hardened to it all but it will never be like it was. Some days I'm going to look at you and feel so sick I'll want to die. Other days, well, it will be good, but never like it was at first. You

can't ever go back. I might even run off with another guy again but I'll always come back."

I sat up and swung my feet around. I reached for my cigarettes. I lit up and took a long drag. I smoked it nearly to my fingertips. Then. "How'd you like to go to South America Anna? The Pelican II is nearly finished and I've got ten thousand in the bank. If I sell the T-bird I'll have thirteen thousand. No more dope. No more houses. We can go a long time on thirteen thousand dollars. Maybe I can find something legitimate down there."

For a long period she didn't say anything.

"It was good at the beginning wasn't it? Shouldn't we try to make it that way again?"

"Yes." She said finally. "It'd be a beginning anyway. But you know you can't quit. God how I wish you could but you don't have to Carl. I might learn to love you anyway."

I stood up and flicked the butt through the open porthole. "I'm gonna try Anna. I'm sure as hell going to try." I bent down and kissed her. Then I crossed to the other bunk and crawled in. I was asleep in a minute.

The sun was coming through the portholes in thin pencil like beams. I looked across at the other bunk and Anna. My goddess I thought. "Anna." She stirred slightly. "Time to get up." Then I went above, over the side and into Hale's office.

"Morning Hale." I wondered if

he slept in his chair too. He might have been asleep but his beady little eyes were on me the minute I stepped inside.

He yawned. "Good morning my friend." He turned his chair towards the desk. "It is a good thing I did not call that number for you last night. I see the little woman has come back. Too bad." He sighed. "Ah Carl. Someday that wench will be the death of all of us." He pointed at his foot. "I can feel it all the way down to there."

I wondered why I didn't feel in a high good humor. It was a beautiful day. I had Anna! But there was still a sour taste in my mouth and a scowl on my face. I reached up and scratched my crew cut. "Anna is my woman Hale. Don't ever speak of her that way again."

He snorted. "She is a worthless wench. A fickle bitch. For a very small fee I could arrange for an accident. She would never sleep with anyone else again. No man would even look at her. How would you like that? We would both be rid of a problem. I don't like my men married Carl." He patted his stomach. "It makes them weak in here."

I clenched my fists. "You lay one hand on her and I'll kill you Hale. I don't care what happens to me but so help me God I'll get to you."

He smiled. "I had better make sure then any accident happens to both of you hadn't I?"

"You'd better knock me off first or you'll never get to Anna."

He shook his head sadly. "For why are we fighting. We are friends. What can I do for you this morning?"

"I need gas." I wondered when I would have the courage to tell him I was quitting.

"Pete will take care of it. If he is here, I think I heard him around a little while ago."

I turned and walked to the door cursing myself for a coward. I stopped with my hand against the door. "Riverman!" I snapped.

"Yes."

"This is the last load I'm hauling. After this I quit. Anna and I are taking the Pelican II to South America."

"Oh?" He said slowly.

I wasn't sure what to say. I had been sure that he would threaten me. "I'm no good at this Hale. Every time I see a cop I could swear that he's looking straight at me. Every time I bring in another load I feel like a rat. Did you ever see what happens to the people who take that stuff?"

I heard his chair squeak as he turned. "So my friend, I feel like a rat also. But they have a very effective lotion for this feeling. You spread it on your hands. It is called money. It is very soothing. I think that perhaps we should pay you four thousand per trip now. This inflation is affecting everyone."

"You make this trip. As you said. We will talk about it later. I must think about this."

"Think hard." I shoved open the door. Pete was standing just outside. I wondered if he'd been eavesdropping or just making sure that no one else did. Riverman's men were like shadows. It didn't matter. Hale would tell him everything anyway. I walked straight past him. "Top off all the tanks. I got a trip to make." He followed without a word.

I stopped for a moment before going on board. There wasn't a cloud in the sky nor a trace of haze. I had to squint from the brightness. It was a perfect day, weatherwise. On board I started the engines and backed out the Pelican. I idled over to the gas dock and backed in. I left the engines turning over at idle and tossed Pete a line. He threw a hitch on a piling and jumped down on deck. I watched him unscrew the gas caps and then went forward still squinting from the bright sunlight.

Anna was sitting on her bunk brushing out her hair. She started as I came down the steps and I saw that she wore a rather sad expression. I was nervous and jumpy myself. I had the unshakeable feeling that I had blindly stuck my hands out and caught hold of something too dangerous to let go of and too dangerous to hang onto. The bright dawn of doomsday I thought. I had the feeling that this day I would die a little.

Anna was watching me. "Is there any food aboard Carl?"

"A full stock." I opened the hatch

between the bunks and went up in the bow. Then through another hatch to the foredeck to check the anchors. They were properly secured and the spare was lashed down in its place. I backed out. "Do I get a woman cooked breakfast today? I'm tired of opening cans."

She smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Coming up Skipper."

"Atta girl." I said rather tonelessly. Pete was screwing the caps back when I returned to the stern. He nodded at them. "Right up to the top. See you tonight." He jumped off the deck and threw me the line. I bent down from the flying bridge and called to Anna. "Anything you want ashore?"

"No Carl. I'm all set."

I shoved the transmissions in forward and opened the throttles. There was a rumble from the exhausts and the tachometers turned up to a thousand rpm as the Pelican lunged forward. San Diego was soon behind us and a little while later Anna brought up breakfast. It was the first decent meal in a week. She stayed above while I ate. I looked at her and mouthed the words "I love you".

She turned her head towards the open sea. When she looked back a long while later she was smiling. She kissed her fingers then twisted her hand palm up and blew me the kiss. My love, my goddess, my Anna.

We idled up to the dock at El

"H" RUN

Varadero del Diablo in Ensenada a little before two pm.

Hale's contact, Mac Freeman, was as unlike Riverman as a dog a cat. They both had two arms and two legs but the similarity ended there. Mac was nearly as tall as me and twenty pounds heavier. His muscles didn't look particularly large but the tissue must have been as dense as steel and almost as hard. His eyes were large, set wide apart and his nose looked as though he were pressing it against a window. He had a rather wide mouth, thin lips, and a square jaw with just a hint of jut to it. His hair was a dark reddish brown. It had probably once been black but the Mexican sun had turned it a few shades lighter. His tan was almost as dark as his hair. His skin had a leathery look and he looked more friendly than brutal. You had to look at him twice and especially at his eyes to see that there wasn't a trace of feeling in his features. It was as though he were chisled out of brown marble.

He stood by the gas pump looking down at me. I started to say that I wasn't getting any oil pressure on my port engine but I stopped at the imperceptible shake of Mac's head. "Lo Mac," I said tossing him a line. Anna had gone below. She'd never liked Mexico, or so she'd said. Perhaps she just didn't like what we did in Mexico. When we were tied up Mac came aboard. I started to say something but he

spoke first. "Wait till you clear customs. You're in for a rough search today. Somebody's been smuggling American cigarettes in again. Where's Anna?"

"Below. What's my reason for being here?" I wondered why I was whispering. I didn't see any customs officials around.

"You're heading for LaPaz but you had engine trouble."

"That's what I started to say."

"Yeah. I know, but let's not start joking as though it happened all the time. This is a serious business." He looked quickly around taking everything in with several quick glances. Anyone else would have looked furtive and today even Mac looked a little nervous. He spoke out of the side of his mouth. "I hear you want to quit on us."

"You got big ears."

He smiled a tight smile. "Telephones. No offense Carl. I wanted to get out myself about four years back. You won't believe this but Hale let me go without a word."

"And."

"I couldn't make a dime. Legitimate or illegitimate. Everywhere there was an illegal buck being made Hale got a chunk of it. I worked for three months as a department store floorwalker, you know, to spot shoplifters. They paid me ninety-two dollars a week. I can make that in ten minutes now. Like I said though. Three months. That was it and then I was back at Hale Riverman's."

"Apparently he wasn't afraid you'd holler cop."

"If I had I would have gone up just as long as Riverman. Maybe they would have cut it down to just two or three life sentences for me. There's a lot of bodies around with bullets in them from my gun."

"Payoff here, a payoff there. You might have made it. Hale took a hell of a chance."

"I'm not that kind."

"You didn't even think of it?"

"Once or twice. Just like you're thinking of it now. If Riverman gets put away then you're a free man. But you won't scream for the law. You're not the type either. Riverman picks'm real careful, so forget it."

I said nothing for a moment and then. "I'm still quitting. I'm going south. Maybe Brazil or Argentina. I don't know. Someplace where we can live cheap."

"We?"

"I'm taking Anna."

The corner of his mouth twitched, but he said nothing.

"Mac." I said. "Did you ever see the room in the hospital where they give them the cold turkey bit."

He turned his back and looked along the dock. "Yeah." He turned back. "I've seen it. Makes you sick the first time, but let me ask you this. Ever see a really bad auto wreck or a plane crash?"

"Both."

"Would that stop you from selling automobiles or planes, or if you

were the type, make you quit selling tickets for an airline?"

"It might."

"But it's not very likely. I used to feel responsible as hell too. I can remember when I was a teen-ager and I used to say that the worst thing a guy could do was to peddle dope. That if anyone should get the chair it should be a peddler. But not one in a thousand is forced into those first few shots or smokes. Blame the system not the peddler. They don't HAVE to buy the stuff."

"I'm not made the way you are. I've tried telling myself that too. It doesn't work. I'm quitting."

Mac sighed. "I wish you all the god-damned luck in the world but if Hale tells me to put a bullet through you and give you a cement suit I'll do it without a qualm." For the first time I thought I saw a sad look in his eyes.

"I'll bet you would."

"I'll do any damned thing you can name if I get paid enough. Most of the people in this world are running around doing all the same things I do anyway, only they don't get paid. For a thousand bucks I'd rape my mother." He looked genuinely sad. "Custom's will be along in a minute. An hour after that we can take off. We got a passenger incidently." He shrugged his shoulders and I could see the bulge under his arm where the pistol was.

"Anyone I know?"

He left the question unanswered. "Here comes the inspector. I hope to hell you don't have any more cigarettes than would seem normal to a customs inspector." He sounded tired.

"Life doesn't have much direction does it?" I said.

He shook his head. "You come in with nothing you go out with nothing. When I was a little tot I wanted to be a doctor. I wanted to grow up and discover how to keep people from dying. I thought dying was the most horrible thing on earth from the time my Grandpa died. But that was just because of the money he gave me. He always used to give me his loose change. So my life had direction. But I lost all that when my mother started drinking. It's usually the father but in this case it was my mother. One night she got really tight and when my Dad came home she gave him both barrels with his own shotgun. I said the hell with it right then."

"I can see how it might be hard for you to believe in a woman, to love one, and get a little direction in life."

He shrugged. "I got an open mind. But I never seen a woman you could trust. You should have seen it Carl. She was waiting for him to come home. Standing right there in front of the door. He didn't even get the door all the way open. He died slow because it got him right in the crotch. She had a laughing fit and said he'd never

hurt her again with that foul organ. He didn't die until she got a third shell in the gun and blew his brains out. She said I should be glad that she saved me from him." He stopped as the inspector stopped beside the Pelican.

The inspector was a little man with a bristly walrus mustache and contagious smile. His arms looked like the gnarled limbs of a tree at timberline. His eyes were nearly black and they sparkled like wet coal. He looked happy as hell and he whistled the latest hit tune from America all the time he was aboard. I wondered how much he made. A dollar or two a day. If he could be happy I didn't see why I couldn't. He probably had a wife and ten kids at home that he couldn't afford to feed. I wondered if a background the same as Mac's would have made me feel any different. I still had a little flame down deep that believed that there was a little good in the world somewhere, that a guy could find it if he looked hard enough. I wondered what had made Mac so talkative. Suddenly I felt very friendly toward him. I was also glad that he wasn't working against me. Before I had always looked on him as just another one of Riverman's tools. A boot, a wrench, a gun, a Mac Freeman.

I offered the inspector a carton of cigarettes but he got excited and said no he couldn't take them. I could see he wanted them. He was

honest too. I looked at Mac. "Will wonders never cease."

He shook his head. "He's not honest. It's just that the heat's on cigarettes. You should have offered him Anna. He would have taken her."

"That's not funny."

"Sorry. I forgot. You're in love or something." He sounded bitter and sarcastic.

"You ought to try it sometime."

His face was an expressionless mask again. "I did once. When I was in high school. If I get a few drinks under my belt I might tell you about it sometime." He paused. "I'm going after our mechanic." He stepped up on the dock.

Below the scene was familiar. Anna was curled up on her bunk reading a book. I stretched out on the bunk opposite her. "My goddess."

She put down her book and smiled. She looked much more relaxed than she had a few hours earlier. I wondered how it could be that it was only hours since she had come back. It seemed like days. "You'll get eyestrain. Good book?"

She shrugged. "I like to read."

"Last trip hon."

"I hope so. I wish I was as confident as you sound. Maybe I do read too much. In books you can never quit. They kill you first."

"I thought so too but Hale's let others quit."

"He has. Who?"

"Mac."

"Mac!"

"Yeah. Mac once wanted out too." There was a clatter on the deck as Mac and the mechanic came aboard. I wondered if our mechanic knew any other mechanical operation besides changing oil filters and removing false bottoms from tool boxes. "He has a human streak apparently."

She nodded. "Apparently." Her eyes had taken on a kind of distant glitter that I'd never seen before. "That's nice to know. I wasn't ever sure. I always thought that if you shot Mac that the bullets would bounce off, that there wasn't any blood in him." The glitter faded and I wondered what the thought was that had caused it. It seemed that she had seized so quickly on the announcement that Mac was a living breathing being like the rest of us. Perhaps I would never really know her. I changed the subject. "It's going to be good Anna. Just you and me."

She looked wistful. "Do you really think so." She sounded like a little girl and my heart felt like it was going to burst. I smiled, "My beanpole."

"Beanpole."

"That's what Riverman called you."

"I am rather thin. I suppose if I tried, I could gain a little weight."

I got up and put my finger under her chin and tilted her face up trying to imagine her with a big vo-

luptuous body wth a myriad of curves. I couldn't. I kissed her. "Don't you gain an ounce. One of your angles has more beauty in it than all the curves any movie star ever had."

She smiled. "I like you too." She dropped her eyes for a moment, then looked up again and surprised me with, "Carl you believe me when I say that you're my man don't you?"

"Sure."

"Carl, what if you had a younger sister that you loved as much as anyone else in the world. Someone who was all good and no bad, someone who could go a long long way in life."

"I wish I did."

"What if you had to choose between her and me?" The question hung for a moment before I spoke.

"What the hell kind of question is that?"

"Can you answer it?"

I stared at her searching her face for some clue to what she was driving at but there wasn't any. Only sadness. "I don't know what I'd do. What's all this for anyway."

She forced a smile. "Nothing. I just wondered. I do love you Carl. Please believe me."

Mac stuck his head down and said that we were about ready to pull out. I looked back at Anna. "I believe you." I kissed her and went above.

Mac gave me an expressionless look. "Everything ok?" I wasn't

sure whether he meant between me and Anna or the boat. I nodded.

"Good. Then I'll bring our guest aboard." He gave the word guest extra emphasis and shrugged his left arm so the bulge under his arm moved slightly.

I pointed at the engine hatches. "Everything buttoned down?"

"I think so. You'd better check."

I walked over and lifted the hatch. Everything looked all right. There was quick drying paint on the bolts holding the dummy cartridge so that it would look untouched for American customs. Hale thought of everything. I shut the hatch. So big a boat for so small a cargo.

"Okay?" Mac asked.

I nodded and he went up on the dock again. He disappeared behind a shack. When he came back our guest was walking in front of him with a dead look on his face. Anna had come up beside me and I heard her quick breath and out of the corner of my eye caught her hand at her mouth. It was Mansfield. Anna quickly turned and went below. I couldn't blame her. It would have been cruel to make her stay above. I wondered if Mac knew what the situation was.

Mansfield was first aboard then Mac. Only Mac's lips moved. The mask again. "Where do you want us?"

"Up here will be fine."

"Let's shove off. I'm sick of this place." He nodded at Mansfield

and pointed at the back seats. To me he said, "Go a few miles farther off shore than usual. Say forty or fifty miles?"

"Will do." I could ask questions when we were out at sea. I pressed both starters at once and the twin Chryslers rumbled reassuringly from below. There was a faint but familiar vibration at my feet. Mac went back on the dock, cast off the lines and jumped aboard before the Pelican moved away from the dock. I headed straight out and Ensenada was soon getting smaller in the distance.

Anna brought up two cups of coffee and went quickly below before Mansfield could say anything. I checked the compass and turned around on the stool. "Coffee Mac?"

He came up from the stern. "Thanks." He took the other cup and nodded back at Mansfield. "Look at him."

I looked. The look on his face was not that of an expressionless mask but that of utter hopelessness. He sat in the middle of the row of cushions looking over the port side toward the open sea. His shoulders drooped, his jaw was slack. It didn't look like sea-sickness. I'd seen that enough to know what it looked like or what it did not look like. "What's the matter with him?"

Mac spoke slowly, barely moving his lips. His eyes were squinting from the bright sun. "He made a mistake."

I let it go at that. Perhaps later

Mac would elaborate. I looked at him. "Think you can hold a steady course and watch him at the same time?" I nodded at Mansfield.

He started to ask me what made me think he was watching Mansfield but changed his mind. "He won't give us any trouble. You want to go below?"

"I don't have to."

He reached up and put one hand on the wheel. "Go ahead. I'll manage."

Anna was leaning against the hatch staring out the forward portholes. She turned as I came down. She looked almost as bad as Mansfield. I couldn't pretend I didn't notice. "Anything wrong?"

She shook her head. "Beautiful day isn't it?"

"Yes it is."

"Lousy day to die."

"What kind of talk is that?"

She shrugged. "Ever get hit with the notion that you're not going to see another sunrise, another sunset, another orange grove in blossom, all the things you take for granted?" She sat down on the bunk. "It's just a feeling. Maybe it'll go away."

"Everything's going to work out all right." I tried to sound carefree but I didn't sound very convincing so I tried a different tack. "Is it Mansfield?"

"I suppose so." She reached up and unpinned her hair. "I shouldn't have come." I looked at her for a long while. "Chin up hon. We'll be home a little after dark." I looked

at my watch and went up to talk with Mac. "Nearly forty miles out. far enough?"

"Not quite." He paused. "I can stand just about anyone but I can't stand blackmailers."

I looked back at Mansfield.

Mac sighed. "Him. Some how he found out about Riverman. He wanted a hundred thou."

I had a sudden sinking feeling. "Keep the helm Mac, I want to find out something." I dropped below. My feet slammed on the floor. Anna was back at the forward portholes. She turned. I wondered if my face looked as hot as it felt. We stared at each other waiting for the other to speak. I waited her out.

"Something wrong, Carl?"

"You're damn right." It seemed so horrible that a moment before I had been bursting with love and now it was as though she were a stranger.

She turned her back. "You can't ever go back can you. Life goes on no matter what. There's not much left between us is there? I don't know what the matter is Carl. If you weren't just saying those things you'll tell me what it is. I won't say I have a right to know. I want to make a go of things with you Carl and I feel so pessimistic I could cry. Most of us don't know what the future holds for us but with me it's like watching a roulette wheel make its last little twitch when your own number is at least a half turn away."

I clenched and unclenched my fists. "Telling Mansfield about Riverman was a damn fool thing." I watched her back and saw a slight tic in her shoulder. Then she began to laugh. She turned and I saw that her eyes were wet. "Oh Carl."

"Oh Carl my foot. It's not very darn funny."

She wagged her head slowly from side to side. "I never told him anything Carl. He was too busy telling me what a big man he was. I never got a word in edge-wise."

The relief was like the sun coming out again. "That's the truth Anna?"

"What can I say. Swear on a stack of Bibles it's true? I'm not so sure I believe in God any more. But that's the truth as I know it."

I felt like the world's number one rat. My eyes never left her as I sank to the bunk. "Saying I'm sorry doesn't help much does it."

"It'll do. Things are going to be like this between us for a long time." One corner of her mouth turned up. "Maybe it's our environment. Our associates. We don't have any trust left." Her eyes had that funny glitter again.

I stood up and took her in my arms. "I guess we'd better start trusting then." The faraway glitter was still in her eyes.

"Yes." She said almost dreamily. "People who love each other trust each other don't they?" She looked quickly down at the floor as though

she had come out of a trance. "Trust. Such a funny thing." She said it in such a dreamy way that I felt like shivering. Something was wrong and I couldn't help thinking about the pirates of old and their beliefs about women aboard ship. There's a Jonah aboard. It seemed suddenly cold and clammy below and I went back above.

Mac reminded me of an Eskimo staring into the blast of a sixty mile an hour arctic wind. When he looked at me I wondered what particular part of his expression had changed to indicate a question. A man of few words. "She didn't tell him," I said.

He turned away.

I said a bad word and he turned back. "I don't trust anyone any more." I said. "I'm just a suspicious old bastard with his brains hanging between his legs."

He looked down at my crotch. "Cut'm off." He moved the wheel slightly. "You're still alive aren't you? That's better than a lot of other people who thought they could trust people."

"I'm learning to trust Anna again."

He looked suddenly tired again. "I hope it works out for you Carl. I'd like to see it work out for just one person just once. It'd be a new experience." He changed his stance. "Anna's clean?"

I nodded. "Like a new born babe. I wish I'd met her a few years sooner. Things would be different."

"We fifty miles out yet?"

"At least."

He reached for the throttles and the steady thrum from below stopped and we were quietly coasting down. The sudden quiet combined with his tired glance towards Mansfield was unnerving. Mansfield had stopped staring out to sea and was watching Mac, his eyes wide and frightened.

"Dirty work, dirty work." Mac said. He took out his forty-five and handed it to me. "Here Carl. Keep this pointed at him." Then he spoke to Mansfield. "I make this little speach to everyone like you Mansfield. If you got any last wishes I'll try to honor them. I don't like doing this but I don't dislike it either. It's a job. I'm not saying this because I have to rationalize to my conscience. It's just a statement of fact. What's going to happen is going to happen and the best thing you can do is to cooperate. That may sound like a hell of a thing but you'd be surprised how my opinion of a person can change when they die with dignity. I like to tell myself it makes you guys feel better too. In fact I'm sure it does." He had a kind of sick smile. "I know from experience. It's a hot day Mansfield." Mac's voice was almost hypnotic. "You're hot and tired Mansfield. It's a lousy rotten world where a guy can't make an honest buck without bashing someone in the head. Look at that cool water and think how nice it will be to

have that inky blackness shut out all this light and misery. Think blackness Mansfield. Look at the water, not at me." Mac pulled out a worn but wicked looking sap. I wondered if Mac knew how hypnotic he sounded. I was looking out over the cockpit coaming myself and thinking blackness. Cool wet blackness. The Pelican bobbed slowly in the soft swell unaware of the four humans aboard her. The water slapped and swished at her sides. I thought of the night before and of watching the trail of sparks from the butt flicked into the blackness. The sudden hiss and then it was out and all was black again. It was so horribly symbolic. It was as though everything was meant to be blackness and that any momentary light was only an intrusion on the reality of the dark.

I looked at Mansfield and then at the forty-five automatic which was naturally enough black. Then a sudden pall of coldness wrapped itself around me. "Drop the gun Carl. Don't move Mac."

Anna was standing in the companionway with the old army rifle that I used on an occasional shark. I didn't move. Mac slipped the sap back in its sheath and turned so that he could see both Anna and Mansfield.

Anna was looking at me. "The gun Carl. Drop it by your feet and kick it over here."

I dropped it feeling like a block of ice, so cold that even the hot sun

couldn't touch me. I sent the gun to her with a nudge of my foot. Finally I looked away and then at Mac on the other side of the deck. The tired look was gone. He was Mac the statue again. Then Mansfield was standing up. The slackness was gone from his jaw and he looked almost determined. He spoke for the first time since I'd seen him come aboard. "Send the gun down here Anna. I can take care of these hoods."

When Mansfield had the gun in his hand he said. "Nice work Anna." He sat down on the cushion that he had occupied since Ensenada. Anna's sad, "I don't feel particularly proud of myself." was only confusing.

"You should be." Mansfield said. "You Freeman. Think black. It's a rotten world remember. For you anyway. You'll be glad to leave it."

Mac shrugged. "Probably."

I looked at Anna but she turned away. I looked at Mac and wondered if he was thinking, "I told you so." Instead he said. "I made a mistake Carl."

"You sure did." Mansfield chortled.

Mac leaned against the coaming. "Don't spend too long thinking about what you're going to do with us. Carl might forget how to navigate in the dark." He sounded as though little had changed. Perhaps only a little had changed. Love and hate were much the same thing anyway. To use a cliche there was

only a fine line between them. If you were practically on the line anyway it probably didn't make much difference when you crossed it, if you crossed it. The coldness was leaving me and I wondered if I had yet crossed the line or whether I was yet teetering on the edge. I wondered if everyone standing on the brink felt such an immense sadness.

"If he forgets, this will remind him fast enough." Mansfield waved the gun.

Mac looked across the deck at me. "Spoken like a true slob. The best thing you could have done Mansfield would have been to die with dignity because alive you're a true blue slob. If I don't kill you it won't be long before someone else does. What about her?"

Mansfield chuckled. He seemed to be the only one who was enjoying himself. "Just like a story book isn't it Mac? The professional stays calm and cool and figures to talk his way out. Wait till you take a bullet in the middle, right where it hurts. See how calm you are then."

Mac sounded as though he was sure that the bullet would bounce off. "I won't even twitch Mansfield. Not one twitch."

Anna looked at me before looking at Mansfield. "I said I shouldn't have come Carl, I'm sorry." She really looked sorry. I surprised myself. "It's all right." I was probably past caring. "You've probably got your reasons."

She turned away. "Do I need to stand here with this thing any more Don? You seem to have things in hand."

Mansfield smiled and the whiteness of his false teeth flashed in the sun. "Go ahead and put it away. You did a good job Anna. I'll never forget it."

Anna turned and wordlessly went down the companionway. I bent and watched her go forward. She dropped the rifle on the table, picked up her book and collapsed on a bunk. The black widow has finished her meal I thought and straightened so that I could not see her. I looked at Mac. "I can't hate her Mac. I don't feel anything."

"Better that than hate. It's the first step towards becoming a pro. Now look at him." He looked at Mansfield. "The first mark of an amateur is false self confidence. He voluntarily cut the odds from two to two to one against two. Look at him. Cocky, confident. Reminds me of a little banty rooster I had once . . ."

Mansfield's smile disappeared. "Shut up Freeman. You'll talk when I want you to talk and only then."

"He was king of the yard." Mac said. "He used to really enjoy his simple life. Running around the chicken yard scratching for worms and throwing out his chest around the hens." I wondered if he was making it up for Mansfield's benefit or telling the truth. "And every

time he found a worm he would cock his head back and crow. You could almost hear him saying, 'what a great rooster am I' every time." Mac's voice had taken on that hypnotic quality again and even Mansfield was listening intently. Mac folded his arms. His right hand was right on the handle of the sap. "There was some tall weeds and grass over at one side of the yard and one time he found himself a black worm over there. It looked just like one of these blue gray worms that he was used to except that it had a sharp tail. Well sure enough he decided he'd found himself another worm and he crowed just like he always did and then went after that worm. Turned out the worm wasn't a worm but a six foot blue racer." Mac shook his head. "Best little rooster I ever owned. Too bad." There was only just the trace of a smile on Mac's features. Mansfield had a puzzled look on his face as he looked at Mac, as though he couldn't quite figure it out."

"The expression on the rooster's face was just like the one on him." Mac added with a pointed glance towards Mansfield. The puzzled look turned to anger. "That's the last funny story you're ever going to tell Freeman. I hope you enjoyed it."

"I'm sure Carl did." Mac said.

I hoped I didn't look as puzzled as Mansfield had. "That was very good." I said. I tried to smile won-

dering what other words of wisdom Mac might have to say.

"Why don't you ask me for advice?" Mac said to Mansfield. "You're an amateur and amateurs always do the wrong thing. That's why so many people are getting killed every day. Amateurs out driving cars. Amateurs out flying airplanes. Amateurs out shooting people. Amateurs taking baths. Smoking cigarettes. Seems like nowadays there's some sort of sophistication attached to being an amateur with ten thumbs. Sort of a high class do it yourself thing. You know that you aren't likely to get off this boat alive because even if we headed full speed for home we'd still be late so there are a lot of people that are going to wonder where we are. If you show up in this boat without Carl and me . . ." He shrugged expressively. "So you can't shoot us and throw us overboard. What do you figure on doing?"

"None of your business."

Mac sighed. "The odds aren't really in your favor."

Mansfield looked suddenly worried. "Thanks for helping me think. I don't have any chance with you so I'll have to take my chances without you. I shoot you both and turn you over to the sharks. Then I head for Mexico. Down there they don't much care what we gringos do as long as we don't shoot any of them."

Mac nodded sagely. "Sounds

good." He paused. "Do me one favor Mansfield?"

Mansfield looked at him suspiciously. "Yeah?"

Mac looked at me and Mansfield followed his glance. As soon as Mansfield's eyes were off him Mac mouthed me a silent message. I hoped I'd read his lips right. "Duck if you can."

"Him." Mac said looking at me. "Shoot him first. I like to watch people die."

Mansfield pointed the gun at me.

"What's holding things up?" Mac said. "A pro doesn't bother about conscience or right and wrong. Bang bang and it's all over. No speeches no nothing. It's the only way. Never really shot anyone have you Mansfield. Take it from me. It's not too bad. Just don't turn your head away or you'll miss the heart and do a messy job. Stare'm right in the eye and pow. That's it."

Mansfield's eyes were big wide circles. He stared at me as though in a trance his hand tightening on the gun. Duck, Mac had said. Where, how, when. I couldn't take my eyes off the gun and I was starting to think, so this is what it's like. You look down a black hole and then all of a sudden . . .

The gun clattered on the deck and slid towards me. I hadn't even seen Mac move. "THE ROD CARL!" I heard him yell and I was scrambling after the gun. He was wrestling with Mansfield. In a

daze I picked up the gun and watched. Mansfield suddenly went limp and Mac broke away throwing himself across the deck at the same time as I heard a blast from the companionway. The rifle I thought numbly. Anna's helping out with the rifle. I kept staring at Mac. His voice was a scream. "THE COMPANIONWAY CARL. SHOOT DAMNIT." My head swiveled slowly towards the companionway. Anna was swinging the rifle towards me and backing down the companionway at the same time. I pointed the pistol and the blade of the sight fell between Anna's breasts. Small proud breasts high on her chest. I looked up and we were staring at each other. The scream came from the very bottom of my soul. "ANNA. MY Anna."

"Shoot damnit!" Mac yelled. I shut my eyes and all the sounds were drowned by the blast. Hot particles were burning my face and when I opened my eyes again it was as though I had landed on the middle of a see saw. The world rocked and rocked. It steadied slowly and someone was prying the gun from my hand. The world steadied. "I shot her?" I said incredulously. All I could remember was the black sight like a knife between her breasts. "Oh God did I shoot her?"

"Yes." Someone said. I recognized the voice as Mac's. "Thanks. I couldn't have made the length of the deck in time."

I sat down on the deck my brain reeling and twisting as it tried to think. "What about Mansfield?"

"Broken neck. Jap trick. Haven't used it for a long time. Welcome to the club Carl."

"What club?"

He stopped at the companionway. "Skip it. It doesn't matter."

I shut my eyes and thought black. I came to wondering how long I had been out. The waves were still slapping gently at the Pelican's side. "I might as well have shot myself." I said to no one in particular. "I'm dead. I got nothing left." Then I stood up and found to my surprise that I was fairly steady. I looked about. There were two long bundles each wrapped in a blanket at the end of the afterdeck. The blankets were lashed on with quarter inch manila line. I looked around for Mac. He was standing by the starboard coaming looking forward over the roof of the cabin. He looked across at me. I pointed aft. "Him and Anna."

He nodded. "You got something we can use for a weight?"

"Hundred pound anchor. That do?"

"That will do beautifully."

"It's up forward." I said. He started for the companionway. "Mac." I said. He stopped. "Yeah."

"You're going to lash both of them to it?"

"Why not?"

"I've plenty of anchors that I won't need this trip. I'd like to bury

Anna a mile or so away from him. Don't say she's just as bad as him. I don't know. I don't care. I just don't want her to go where ever she's going with him lashed against her."

He shrugged. "Okay Carl."

He went forward and brought the anchors back. I wobbled over to the stool at the wheel and sat down. I marveled that the engines started. It seemed as though everything should be dead. I left them at idle. Mac hefted the lump that was Mansfield and rolled it over the coaming. I opened the throttles as soon as I heard the splash. A few drops of water came over the side from the splash. I felt nothing. "I don't feel anything." I said. I couldn't watch him tie the anchor to Anna. I wondered if I could cry and found that I couldn't. Crying took practice apparently.

"Say when." Mac said from the stern.

I looked at my watch. The crystal was broken and the hands were stopped at quarter of five. I waited until the sun had moved a little closer to the horizon. Then I backed off the throttles to idle. I turned. "When." I said tonelessly. Mac hefted her over the side. "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken away." I intoned in a dead voice. "May she rest in peace." I smashed the throttles forward and headed straight for home. There were a lot of things that I wanted to say to Mac like were we any bet-

ter than they, or any worse, and why were we living and they dead and did any of it really matter, but I knew that most of that would never get said. I would think it and then never get around to saying it.

I couldn't tell what time it was but it was dark and I really didn't care when we tied up at Riverman's boatyard. Mac threw the lines around the pilings for me. I didn't feel like doing anything. When the engines were shut down I said to Mac: "Maybe she loved him."

Mac looked at me and shrugged. "Who knows." We looked at each other a moment longer and then headed for Hale's office.

"Hello hello hello." Hale said. "Tonight for the first time in my life I am seriously worried. You are so late. Come in come in." Oddly, I was wondering if he had ever played Santa Claus. He peered at us out of those ever bright beady eyes. "There is just the two of you?"

Mac leaned against a pile of crates. "Carl lost two of his anchors. He'll be needing new ones."

Hale was quick to understand. "They are heavy. They sink so fast. Blub, and they are gone." He looked at me. "And you Carl. You look very tired."

"He is." Mac said. "The damn woman double crossed him and pulls the accomplice act just before I gave Mansfield the deep six." He shrugged. "Women." He looked at "Let's get pasted."

"That," I said, "is a good idea." Sadness was gone, happiness gone, love gone, hate gone. There was nothing left but to get drunk.

Hale slowly swiveled his chair about and fixed his stare squarely on me. The silence was awkward. Then. "She tried to save him?"

"Yeah." I said. "Let's get out of here Mac."

Hale lifted his hand. "Wait . . ."

I turned tiredly back. "She was a worthless wench and a liar. Don't rub it in."

"No Carl, wait. I am human. I do not like to see you feel so bad."

I said a bad word. "And you're going to cheer me up?"

"Perhaps." He shrugged. "I can try anyway."

"Don't bother. As of now I'm quitting. Remember?"

"My grapevine. You know? It is always feeding me information. Today I find out that this Mansfield has been putting the screws to her."

Mac turned back from the door. "How?"

"Your Anna has a younger brother studying to be a doctor." Hale said. "But one thing I am not sure of. I don't know why she took up with this Mansfield to begin with."

"I do." I said, but I wasn't about to explain.

Hale held up one fat finger. "First this Mansfield finds out that she is married to Carl who he knows works for me. He knows I

am . . ." He gave that shrug again. "But he has no proof. He stumbles onto the information that Anna has this brother and he sees a way to put the screws to me if he can break Anna." Hale shook his head. "He should have known better."

Mac was wearing the first sneer I had ever seen him use. "So he grabs the kid and says, Get me info or poof. No kid."

Hale turned his back. "My pigeon tells me that the agreement was that he would not release her brother until I had come across with some money. Of course you can never trust a blackmailer but that is what the agreement was. If anything untoward befell him in the interim." Hale paused. "As you say." He turned his hands out palm up. "Poof." He turned around once more and looked at me. "So now perhaps you feel better."

I didn't. I felt sick.

The emotion in Mac's voice surprised me. "What about the kid?" He snarled. "Can't we . . ." perhaps the kid reminded him of himself.

Hale shook his head. "It was early this morning when you grabbed Mansfield." He turned again with a gesture that said he was through talking. "The police found the boy in a ditch about three hours ago."

"Let's get out of here." I heard Mac say. "For once let's go get blind staggering drunk."

We found a little dingy bar a few blocks from Riverman's. We took a

table and sat down. Mac ordered two bottles and we started drinking without a word. Later when I spoke I could hear a slur in my voice. The bar was moving slowly up and down and the lights were revolving in a pinwheel of color. "Just once." I said. "Admit it. Admit that people stink. Admit that this is a lousy world."

"I admit." Mac said.

I swallowed another half a shot. "Hey Mac." I said.

He shook his head like a boxer coming up off the canvas for the last time. "Yeah."

"I loved her Mac. I loved her."

He tried to reach over and pat my shoulder. "Sure you did Carl."

Then suddenly everything turned blurry in the rush of tears. I laughed. "Hey Mac. I'm crying. Can you beat that. I'm crying."

"So what. So am I."

"Have a drink." I said.

"I just did."

"I'm still going to quit this lousy racket." I said.

Maybe I would quit and maybe I wouldn't. Maybe I would wake up dead. Maybe I would wake up and find myself still working for Riverman. So what. Who cared.

I reached for the bottle and poured my glass full, splashing a little on the table.

After a while everything turned black.



PARTY POOPER

They walked into the bomb shelter and Elvera cooed, "Why, darling, it looks just like a tomb!" That's what really gave him the idea.

BY DUNDEE McDOLE

IF IT hadn't been for the Russians rocket rattling, making people think of bomb shelters, I really don't think I would have killed Elvera. Oh, I'll admit I had thought about it off and on for eight of the nine years I'd been married to her but only momentarily in times of desperation.

I suppose, thinking about the incredible blunder now as the clock ticks off my final minutes before that last long walk to the green room, it all began at the cocktail party Elvera gave to celebrate my thirty-eighth birthday. Elvera loved parties. She loved giving parties, loved

going to parties even more. Actually, I don't know which was worse—the constant round of festivities or Elvera's imaginary ailments in between times when she was literally bored to tears.

We lived in one of those sprawling ranch-type monstrosities in what is considered a prestige area. You know the type all too well I'm sure. A custom-built package of two-thousand square feet decked out with scrolled eave trimmings, gables, and fake birdhouses, or peaked Oriental rooflines, or whatever's fashionable at the moment. A few years earlier the site had been a prune orchard edged with walnut trees along the highway. Now Oldbrook Place swarms with swimming pools, split rail fences, and social doings—all neatly set-off from the peasantry by the drainage ditch, which gave the place its name, and the highway to the sea. Elvera hadn't been satisfied until we were right in the center of the station wagon and sports car elite.

This birthday celebration for me was one of Elvera's all-out efforts. The garden was festooned with colored Japanese lanterns swaying with the wind and reflecting in the swimming pool and the sliding glass doors opening onto the patio. Everywhere you looked a bit of the Far East had been artfully arranged from the Noh masks tacked on skinny trees to a grotesque, pot-bellied idol squatting complacently at the corner of the patio.

Elvera was sitting cross-legged on a red Japanese pillow sipping a syrupy fruit-and-soda concoction when someone told a mildly funny joke about a bomb shelter. That did it. Suddenly she had a new project. Her ringed plump fingers fluttered in the air flashing bits of fire as her voice rose above the monotony of the samisen music coming from the stereo sound system.

"That's what I want, Jack!" she exclaimed stabbing me in the calf with a lacquered nail. "You're always off supervising work on some bridge or tunnel, and I don't have anyone to protect little ole me."

I was too tired to answer. The damn hibachi belched forth another black cloud. It wouldn't draw properly, and all my efforts to coax a bit of heat from it just produced more smoke. But Elvera had insisted upon the hibachi. Sukiyaki was prepared on a hibachi so a hibachi we must have even though the Japanese restaurant on El Camino had promised delivery at nine o'clock sharp.

Elvera cracked me playfully across the shin with her fan then waved it airily a few times as I bit my lip. She was resplendent in a purple silk kimono embroidered with multicolored birds outlined in silver. Arching her eyebrows, she cocked her head to one side and cooed, "My own bomb shelter." She tossed her head causing comb ornaments to jingle. "You can start first thing Monday morning."

That was another of Elvera's endearing qualities. She thought money appeared with the scratch of a pen on a blank check. I don't think she really knew my heavy construction business made all these elaborate parties possible, and a business doesn't run itself.

Rubbing smoke-sore eyes, I said, "Why don't you take that trip back to your home in Indiana?" I reached for another can of beer. "I hardly think the Russians would waste ammunition on Five Mile Junction."

"Now, darling, I couldn't leave you here unprotected not even to see all my lovely friends back home," she pouted. "Besides, it isn't as if I had any family to visit."

Elvera had been talking about spending a few months in her hometown ever since we'd first been married. Not that I really expected her to go. It was something like the diet she was always going to start and never really got around to trying.

Maybe I'd better explain a little about my ever-loving wife. When I'd married her, she'd been a sexy-looking blonde with an abundance of curves. As each year went by, the hair became brassier and the curves became more ample until now there was just too much of her. She was like a peach that had been left on the tree too long—soft, mushy, overripe.

I turned back to the hibachi. Happily, the smoke had thinned; and

the merest trace of heat could be felt.

"Yes, I'll take that trip," she nodded, "just as soon as you finish the bomb shelter."

"You know, Jack, it's really not a bad idea," Tom Manners, the dentist who lived in the pocket-sized Southern mansion on our left, said suddenly. "Elizabeth and I have seriously considered it ourselves. After all we do live in a prime target area what with all the electronic plants and the naval air base here." He stared helplessly through black horn-rimmed glasses. "Being in construction you'd know how it should be done. You could show us the way."

Elvera tittered, "Oh, Jack will do it for me." Then she simpered, "Won't you, dear?"

It's hard to be firm when you feel like a fool, and I certainly did in the bilious green kimono which flapped about my knees and sagged in the back, wadding into a doughy lump whenever I sat down. I stared at her through the shimmering heat of the hibachi. Even in the uncertain flickering lantern light I could see the white line around her pinched mouth as she stared back at me. I knew then the tunnel project my firm was working on would see little of the boss for the next few weeks. Finally, I shrugged in defeat. "If that's what you want, dear."

So that's how I came to build the bomb shelter out beyond the pool on the other side of the fruitless

mulberry trees. I suppose, too, it was Elvera who gave me the idea of making it her grave.

Typical of my wife, she ignored the whole project until it was almost done. I'd had the area excavated, put in the cement block walls with a sheet of metal as a roof. Over this I'd poured a six-inch layer of concrete covered by a six-inch layer of dirt that brought it up even with ground level. I'd just completed the curved entranceway when she flounced in one evening, looking rather incongruous in one of the soft chiffon dresses she so dearly loved; her charge accounts at all the most expensive stores proved that every month. Elvera was one of those women who wouldn't dream of wearing the same dress twice. Tom and Elizabeth Manners trailed along behind her.

Why, darling, it looks just like a tomb!" Elvera exclaimed waving a yellow square of chiffon that matched her dress. "So grim!"

I managed a good smile . . . considering. "Well, why don't you decorate it? Put a few of your gay touches about. Some Spanish shawls, a few fans, or how about those red harem pajamas you wore to Linton's Come-as-you-are party the other night?"

Oh, yes, I forgot to mention my work had been interrupted by two impromptu barbecues and a house-warming.

"Why, that's a lovely idea," Elvera cooed fluttering about the ten by

fourteen room. "Cozy yet distinctive."

"Now, Elvera, don't forget to have ample water and food supplies," Tom intoned nodding sagely. "That's very important they say."

I felt myself getting hot under the collar when I looked at his bland face. "Yes, I imagine it would be important," I said smoothing a bit of mortar between two cement blocks.

"Well, it looks as if you'll be heading for Indiana in the near future," Tom said to Elvera.

Elvera playfully flicked the chiffon square at him. "You're just teasing me, Tommy," she giggled, "but I'm going to surprise you. One of these mornings you'll find I've simply . . . disappeared." She patted the puffs of her latest hair style. She'd been to the beauty salon that day for her twice weekly appointment and had returned home looking as if she were balancing a pyramid of Chinese egg rolls on her head. "Yes, that's just what I'll do. I'll have no trouble catching a jet flight to Indianapolis now that summer's over. It's just an hour's drive to my little ole home town."

"Oh, that does sound like fun," Elizabeth Manners squeaked. She was a mousy woman, addicted to dull colors, duller conversation, and a minimum of make-up. I always suspected she had a secret desire to be the flamboyant type like Elvera.

"Hey, Jack, what're you going to do with all this readymix?" Tom

asked motioning toward the cement I'd stacked off in a corner.

"That's for the floor," I said. "I'm going to cement in the generator. Probably take me another week to finish up."

Tom shook his head. "This husband of yours is quite a guy, Elvera. He thinks of everything."

Fluttering her eyelashes, Elvera simpered at us, "Yes, isn't he simple mar-r-r-velous! Who'd suspect Muscle-Bound would have a brain, too." She giggled and picked her way daintily over the uneven dirt floor to the entranceway. "C'mon everybody, let's get out of this tomb. Lil ole me could use a drinkie."

I suppose that's when I made up my mind to do it although I did wonder later whether I hadn't been planning it all along what with leaving the floor until the last. Anyway this "tomb", as Elvera had named it, would be just that—a nice place for a body to fade away into dust—forgotten in time.

The next week passed rapidly. I even whistled while I worked. I think I felt better than I'd felt in years almost as if a big weight had been lifted from my shoulders. No more parties for me, no more entertaining at all. I could come home when I damn well pleased, shed my clothes, prop my feet on the coffee table and watch boxing or football. Get a decent leather chair in this futuristic furniture store. Line up the beer cans from here to the kitchen. Smoke cigars. Maybe even

read a good murder mystery once in a while. . . .

Finally Thursday night I put the last touches on the shelter. I laughed aloud as I checked over the job. If there was another world, Elvera could give her parties there; but sure as hell she wouldn't be giving any more parties on earth.

Once again I checked beneath the bunk beds. Yes, I'd picked out an ideal last resting place. The damp moldy earth smell was strong in my nostrils as I patted the bunk bed affectionately. Such a nice marker for a grave. Dirt topping then a concrete crust—thick and smooth—and the job would be done.

Oh, I'd worked things out very carefully. The next night would be Friday; and wonder of wonders! no one had mentioned the word—P*A*R*T*Y. Not that it mattered much, of course; my plan was flexible; but I did want to finish up, get it all over with.

The deal was simple. I'd do away with her, tuck the body away neatly, and finish off the cementing. Then a short trip up the Peninsula to International Airport; and as far as anyone was concerned, Elvera had finally made her triumphal trip to Indiana. A few weeks later, after a late-at-night phone call, I'd be the bereaved husband of an accident victim in far away Indiana. I'd even take a jet to Indianapolis, spend a restful week at some quiet hotel while I was supposedly arranging for Elvera's internment in the fam-

ily plot, and then I'd be free, free. I patted the bunk bed again. Such a nice marker.

Humming happily, I went into the house ready for a good night's sleep. Elvera was sitting at her dressing table rubbing some orange-colored mess on her face.

"What's that junk?" I asked.

"Hormone cream. Must be good, it's \$25 for this bitty jar," she murmured carefully smoothing up and out. "Did you finish?"

"Yes . . . just a minor detail or two." My voice was steady as I asked, "You don't have any plans for tomorrow evening, do you?"

She turned from the mirror and snapped. "Of course not. You know I don't make plans without telling you."

I tied the cord of my pajamas. "Good. I'll be home around nine then. I've some paper work I have to finish up."

She frowned. "Don't be later than nine. You know I hate to spend an evening by myself."

The next day dragged by, but finally at eight-fifty I got out of the car and walked into the darkened house. In the family room Elvera sat at the rattan bar a martini in one hand and a long bejeweled cigarette holder in the other. Her face above the flame red dress, one I'd never seen, of course, split into a big toothy grin as I came into the room. "Dar-r-r-ling, you're on time!" she bubbled not taking her eyes off her reflection in the bar mirror.

Momentarily I was startled. Usually, if I arrived home anytime after five, I'd find her stretched out on the chaise, witch hazel pads on her eyes and a look of suffering on her face. In fact, I had sort of relied on finding her this way. I shrugged. I could do it just as easily at the bar.

I tossed my attache case on the sectional and walked up to her. She had just craned her neck forward to inspect her hair-do when I brought the side of my hand down on her neck—hard. She collapsed into my arms, and I laid her out on the floor and reached for a pillow from the chair. As I held it over her face, I noticed how nicely the pillow matched her scarlet dress.

"No more parties for me," I muttered through clenched teeth. Finally, I slung her over my shoulder and made my way out the patio door.

Outside a car door slammed, and I heard the receding tap-tap of heels as someone approached a neighbor's front door. I passed the pool, staggered a bit as the pool heating system kicked on but remembered to duck when passing under the mulberry trees. The curved entranceway of the shelter was a problem; but after some shifting and maneuvering, I managed to get inside. I sighed with relief then.

I really don't know whether I heard the click of the light switch, but just then the lights came on blindingly.

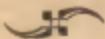
"Surprise! Surp . . . !!!" The

voices died away to gasps and gurgles.

The only one I really saw was Tom Manners—the rest were just a blur shifting about uneasily in the background. Tom with his mouth hanging open and his horn-rimmed glasses sliding down his nose as I

stood there, Elvera's limp body sagging in my arms. I guess it was then I began to laugh.

God, how wrong I'd been. I hadn't known while I was holding that pillow over Elvera's face, but I had one more of her parties to go to after all.



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"God," she thought. Had he recognized her? There was no way of being sure. She had to do something. "Kill him!"



THE DECEIVER

BY
LUCY
SPEARS
GRIFFIN

IT WAS such a small pillow, no more than six inches wide and four inches long with a bullet hole right through the center. The detective looked at it and then at the woman being wheeled out to the back elevator. He turned an aggrieved and shocked face to his partner, "All we wanted to know was if the place had been robbed lately and she starts laughing. Then she screams that she did it and the guy slaps her." He chewed on an un-

lit cigar, "It's too simple to be real, when she ran and got that gun and shoved it at me, I got scared, it's all wrong somehow."

His partner nodded, "It beats me, it's the weirdest one I've ever seen and I've been picking up homicides for thirty years. Did you see the layout of that place? I sunk ankle deep in one of the rugs. This gal has everything so she drives forty five miles and kills a gas station attendant for kicks."

Lynette kept her eyes closed, she could hear everything they were saying, she wasn't going to try and tell them again. They were all so thick headed, Julian glaring at her and then slapping her when she started to talk to the detective. If they had let her finish they wouldn't be wondering why she had killed Paul. First they had come with that idiotic pillow Claire had made in therapy class, a personalized pillow with "Lynette Liebmann" embroidered all over it in minute script. Of course it was her pillow, there wasn't another like it in the whole world. Claire had shrieked, "Why I made that pillow."

Julian had shouted at her to "Shut up" and then slapped her. The moment the detective held out the pillow she had known it was all over. She remembered then that she had left the pillow on the counter when she went back to see what Paul had been writing.

That laughter had risen when she handed the gun to the detective. She'd tried to hold it back but it came out anyway. It bubbled out filling the whole terrace with sound, it was as if there were someone else laughing. Then all at once the terrace was filled with people, and someone was wrapping her in a sheet and someone else stuck her arm with a needle. She peeped at the detectives through half closed eyes, they had stood aside and she was being lifted inside an ambulance.

The one with the pillow said, "This is one case I'm going to follow through, day off or not. I want to know why she killed the little guy."

The other answered, "No woman ever knows why she does anything. I'll bet you ten to one she didn't have anything else to do that evening so she shot him. Some nut doctor will get her out and the next time she gets bored with her fat and hairy husband, she'll go out and shoot some other guy."

Lynette thought a lot about that last remark. No Julian wouldn't get her out, Julian didn't like scandal. She was the fourth Mrs. Liebmann and each of her predecessors had done a lot less than murder. It was really too bad this had to happen, she was so right for Julian. She sighed as she heard the ambulance start, if she had only taken one of the other pillows from the lounge, but then there was that letter. Always it went back to that letter, that silly letter which had caused her to be trapped. If she hadn't gone back to see what was in the letter she would not have forgotten the pillow, if she had not forgotten the pillow she would never have been caught. She felt that laughter rising again, she pushed it down, she mustn't laugh, nobody liked her laughter.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on not laughing. She was so calm, never in all her life had she felt so easy and peaceful, she hoped

what ever they had shot into her arm lasted for a long time.

The ambulance stopped and they lifted her out and wheeled her into a courtyard. The sky seemed so far away against the glare of the city lights. It had been so close when she waited for time to pass on the hill. They were wheeling her down a long corridor, she gave a parting look at the sky, it might be a very long time before she saw it again. Now they were rolling her down a long corridor and into a room. She closed her eyes, someone lifted her from the stretcher to a bed. She lay still looking up at the dim light overhead, she was suddenly very sleepy and the light went away.

Someone was asking her something, she looked, all she could see was a pair of white trousers and a notebook on the knees of the trousers. She lay back again and closed her eyes.

The white trousers asked, "Do you know where you are?"

She looked around at the walls, they were white tile, she must be in some hospital. She nodded and her head felt so light, she wondered if it had floated away with the effort.

The voice asked again, "What is your name?"

That seemed silly, but perhaps he didn't know, perhaps those detectives hadn't told him. She answered, "Lynette Liebmann."

After what seemed a long time, the voice asked softly, "Do you know why you're here?"

She answered, "Yes."

The voice was excited, "Do you want to tell me about it?"

She closed her eyes, it was easier to think that way. It was a different voice from the detectives, softer, more understanding. She turned her head and looked at her questioner, he was a young man with large brown eyes, they looked soft like those of a dog. She shrugged, why not tell him, perhaps he would find it as funny as she had. She nodded and closed her eyes to think about it first.

He sat still for a little while, then tiptoed from the room. She watched him go, there was a policeman outside when the door opened. The young man spoke to him, "I'll be back when the drug has had a little more time to work."

She lay still, wondering how to begin telling him when he returned. The letter or the horse, that was it, she had forgotten about the horse. Now it was clear, so very clear. Julian had been engrossed in his business papers since they had started out, he hadn't spoken a word in the hour they had been driving over the long road. She grew tired of looking out of the window at the dusty green foliage on the roadside, the new chauffeur offered no better view, his neck bulged in fat white rolls over his collar. Then her boredom had been broken by the detour.

She felt better now, she would begin it that way. She would start

with the detour. It had run along the side of a railroad, at least the rails offered change from the monotonous lines on the highway.

Then she had seen the barn up ahead with its tall weathervane and had this sense of having been this way before so strongly that she grew frightened. Then they were nearer the barn and she knew what it was that frightened her, it was the weathervane. That oddly galloping horse with its hindfeet reared to kick. She was back on a schoolbus and every one was laughing at Schiller's horse. It had become an expression for the rest of the year, "As crazy as Schiller's horse." They were entering a long curve, her heart pounded, she grew cold and closed her eyes. She wouldn't look, she knew what was in the bend of that curve. Her past was there in a place with a neon sign, "Paul's Gas and Groceries", the past Julian knew nothing about.

The car swept around the bend, there it was just ahead, the gabled roof of the old farmhouse and the bright tin roof of the gas station next to it. After ten years she was coming back to it, she sank farther back against the seat, it should take only a few seconds to go past it.

The big car slowed to a stop by one of the red gas pumps. Julian looked up in annoyance, "What now Harris? I can't be late."

Harris turned, "I'm not sure how long this detour is sir, I wouldn't want to run out of gas."

Lynette watched Paul in the car mirror as he came from the station to the car. He looked the same as he had when she had slipped away in the night ten years ago. Her husband, her legally wedded husband was checking the oil in her car as she sat less than six feet from him with a man she had married in a sumptuous wedding three years ago. She turned her gaze to her own reflection, no one would associate this polished blond with the thin drab woman who had disappeared ten years ago from this hidden corner.

She felt reassured and sat up straighter and lit a cigarette. She would take a good long look at Paul and his house and see to it that she never came this way again. The house was still the same, badly in need of painting and sagging a little more in the back. Two boys came on to the porch and called out, "We're going now Dad."

Paul threw up his hand and waved to them and they rode right past where she was sitting. She really ought to feel something, they were her sons. She didn't though, she hadn't felt anything other than a sense of annoyance when they were born. They seemed sturdy and healthy enough, he must have taken good care of them. She looked back at Paul, his hair was gray, his shoulders more stooped. She wondered why she had married him, even as she wondered, she knew the answer. She had married him because he was a Fleming

and owned all that land, for no other reason.

He had finished filling the gas tank and went to Harris to be paid. Harris gestured to Julian and Paul turned and came to the side of the car where Julian sat. Lynette grew frightened, suppose he recognized her. She laid aside the cigarette and decided to gamble, if she hid her face it might attract Julian's as well as Paul's attention. She sat upright and stared at Paul just as he came face to face with her. He reddened and stared back, a puzzled expression creeping over his face. Julian flushed a dull angry purple, "Well are you going to take this money or does my wife interest you more?"

Paul started suddenly and mumbled, "Sorry, I'll get your change," he took the outstretched bill and turned away. Lynette felt a quick thrill of success, it had worked out even better than she had thought. Julian's anger should erase any memory or curiosity on Paul's part.

Julian still angry, snapped at Harris, "Go on, right now." Harris stepped on the starter, Julian turned to her, the high color receding from his face. "You spell bound that yokel Lynn, you spell bind old Mitchell that way so he will sell those acres to me."

She laughed, wishing Harris would move on instead of sitting there idling the motor, she didn't want to see Paul again. She stroked Julian's cheek, "He probably never saw a twenty dollar bill before. I

wouldn't worry about old Mitchell, they live in the glorious past most of the time, but when money is mentioned, they live right now. Offer him enough and he'll sell."

He took her hand and held it. She shuddered, hoping her revulsion at his touch didn't show. She didn't like him to touch her, his hands were always clammy and his fingers like thick sausage rolls. Harris turned the wheel and the car slid away from the station.

Julian squeezed the captive hand, "Hope you're right, they don't like newcomers in this section and I'm a real newcomer. My ancestors haven't been here the required five generations."

He released her hand and turned back to his papers. Lynette glanced over her shoulder and her heart gave a sudden thud. Paul had come out of the station and was standing in the center of the road watching the fast disappearing car. She choked on her fear, it was bitter and green in her mouth.

Julian looked at her, "What's the matter?"

She answered as best she could, "Nothing, the cigarette I guess. I don't like this section of the country, in fact I don't like the country."

Julian laughed again, "Don't worry, we won't be here any longer than to-night. First thing to-morrow morning back to civilization for us."

The road turned again and they were back on the broad highway.

Lynette lay back against the seat and tried to calm her trembling nerves. All of it had been so unexpectedly thrust upon her. Paul had no right to be right where she had left him so long ago, the road had no right to need a detour that would take her past a forgotten life. Ten years was a long time ago, a long long time ago. The salesman had been killed in a holdup six months after she had run away with him. She had waited in the getaway car and heard the broadcast of his death. She had driven away across a state line and never looked back, neither at him nor anything else. She didn't intend to let Paul frighten her, she had solved bigger and much more dangerous problems than the one Paul offered.

They were turning into the Mitchell's long drive. She looked about her, the old trees lining the driveway were symbolic of the wealth and prestige the Mitchells had known for so long. The landscaped grounds, the huge house were all part of being rich. Her penthouse, her smart friends, her perfect life suited her. She clenched her teeth and determined that one stooped sallow man standing in the center of a road wasn't going to take her out of her magic world. She glanced up into the car mirror, her reflection was as serene as ever, none of her inner turmoil showed.

She spent the afternoon with Mrs. Mitchell, saying and doing all the correct things, admiring the gallery

of long nosed ancestors done in oils, putting forth the right amount of awe at being a guest in such splendid surroundings. She permitted Mr. Mitchell to stroke her thigh beneath the table at dinner and afterwards walked with him to see the formal gardens by moonlight.

She pleaded exhaustion when they returned and left Julian and his hosts drinking sherry at a hideous marble topped table and fled to the cavernous bedroom above. She sat down before the age spotted mirror of an ancient dressing table and began to clean her face. "Tomorrow," she told the wavering reflection in the old glass, "to-morrow we must do something about Paul."

Julian came in, his full face flushed with triumph, "I got it Lynn and all because of you. Name it and you can have it, a new mink, another car, anything."

She looked at the frayed wallpaper and recalled that only one person had served the dinner, a tired looking woman who evidently had also cooked it. The Mitchells had come down in the world, she asked. "Why me?"

He turned from the drink he was pouring, "I don't know how you do it, but they are crazy about you. We're invited back for a hunting party this fall, real old traditional fox hunt."

She rubbed the cream in smooth up and out motions, "Will you want to hunt with these old people?"

Julian settled in the huge pos-

tered bed, "I think so Lynn, these are the kind of people I've always wanted to know."

She sat motionless at the dressing table until his steady breathing told her he had fallen asleep. She walked slowly over to the window and stood looking out over the darkened hills and down into the valley. What was Paul doing now, had he recognized her, if he had not, then he would be sure to recognize her if they came back for the hunt. Had he stood in the road and watched them drive away in order to memorize the license number, would he go to the sheriff or would he come into the city to see Julian?

The more she thought about it, the surer she became that he had known her. She had to prevent his finding Julian and wrecking her life. She had to. The somber night sky was broken by the red lights of a night plane. She watched it disappear into the distance and murmured, "I could do that, I've got money in my personal account. I could simply disappear again. Take a new name, find a new town, a new man." She discarded the words the moment they were out of her mouth. She didn't want to go seeking again, there might not be another Julian over the horizon.

She left the window and filled the glass Julian had left. Perhaps Paul could be paid to divorce her. She discarded the thought, that would leave her open to blackmail. Whatever she did must be final.

Julian left the car at his office when they arrived back into the city. Lynette glad of the opportunity to be alone shut herself in her bedroom as soon as she entered the apartment. She needed the time to think and to plan. It should be easy enough to go down into one of the poorer sections of the city and find someone to handle Paul for her. She grimaced at the thought of what she meant by handle, she forced herself to say it aloud, "Too kill a man for me." She rose and paced the room saying it over and over, practicing the words to use when she found her person.

Someone knocked at the door, she stopped frightened, how loud had she spoken, who was outside? Trembling she forced herself to walk slowly to the door and open it. One of the maids stood on the threshold, "Mr. Julian is on the phone."

Lynette stood up quickly, cold with fear. Paul had already come to the city, it was Julian calling her to tell her. She swayed, the maid rushed to her side, "Are you ill?"

Lynette pushed her away, "No, just tired, I'll take the call in here." The girl looked at her strangely and left the room. She reached for the ivory tinted phone, marveling that she could lift it, grasping for self control, she managed to get out, "Yes Julian?"

He was excited, "This is my lucky day Lynn, pack some outdoor clothing, fisherman gear. I'm going

down to the private fishing lake of the last guy I need for the development. Send them down by Harris, I should be home by Thursday."

The whole room swam around and around Lynette. She sat down trembling, her legs would no longer hold her upright, she was bathed in a cold sweat of relief. Two days to get rid of Paul. Two days alone. Luck didn't belong exclusively to Julian.

Her control and composure regained, she set about packing a small bag for the overnight trip. She opened a drawer to get handkerchiefs. Julian's small gun lay there, a dark gleaming squat thing in its case. She looked at it and as she looked she knew what she could do. There would be no necessity for bringing in a third party to kill him. No need for anyone else to know. Excited now, she finished the packing and took the bag out to the kitchen to Harris. Alone again in her room she worked out her plan. The trip over the expressway took two hours, she had heard Julian say that. Her sports car would cut that time in half. She could do it, get back in the house and no one would ever know she had left it. She remembered the old road she had gone stumbling over to meet her lover ten years ago. If it was still there no one would even see her car. She would park it at the top of the hill in the shadow of the deserted barn as her salesman lover had parked his.

She had read that a pillow would muffle a shot, she need only take the gun and a pillow. Paul was a creature of habit, he would see that his sons were in bed by nine, he would keep the station open until midnight. She would have three hours to get in, shoot him and get out.

She dined alone that evening, tomorrow or the next night she must carry out her plan. She watched the servants and she watched the clock. She would be at home when they left to-morrow night at seven forty five. If by any wild chance she should be asked about Paul, if they traced her as his missing wife, she was at home when her servants left, she had not left the house. She sipped her after dinner coffee slowly. To-morrow night would be the night. The sooner begun, the sooner ended.

She spent the next day with friends, lunching, and at a matinee. She invited them all for dinner to celebrate Julian's return. She ate her solitary dinner at home and asked the maid to bring the small record player to the terrace. She sent her back for an album and again to bring a shaker of cocktails. She listened carefully for the slam of the back door and hurried into the kitchen and waited for the whine of the descending back elevator. The servants were gone.

She hurried back to the terrace and started the record player, it would keep repeating the selections until she returned and cut it off.

She lowered the lights on the terrace, turned up the music and hurried to her own room. She pulled on a dark summer coat and tucked the gun into one of the wide pockets. She snatched a pillow from her lounge and stuffed it into the other pocket. She stood for a second in the dark living room and looked out at the terrace, the music was clearly audible to anyone on the next terrace. The light was dim enough to confuse anyone looking for an occupant in one of the chairs.

She slipped through the darkened kitchen and down the service elevator to the garage beneath the towering building. She could see the attendant reading in his cubicle as she slipped past on the far side of the garage. She drove her car out of the garage into the night traffic. She had chosen a good hour, the traffic was sparse and when she turned into the super highway there were almost no cars abroad. She drove swiftly, enjoying the wind in her hair and the thrill of the knowledge that soon there would be no more reason for fear.

She slowed the car as she approached the tall walnut tree which marked the old wagon road. Her pulse raced, if only it weren't so overgrown in ten years she couldn't find the tracks of the wagons. If the deep wheel marks were still there, she would be able to push her car through any kind of undergrowth. It was a powerful little car.

The headlights outlined the gaunt

old tree, she pulled the car off the road and stopped beneath it and forced herself to wait for ten minutes. She wanted no passing cars to witness her trip in to what looked like an overgrown field of weeds. In the distance a glow lit up the sky. She touched a button on the dashboard and the top slid up. Whoever was about to pass would think it was a pair of lovers waiting for the moon to rise. She hoped it would be someone in a hurry and not some do-gooder who would stop to see if they could help. She got her first wish. The oncoming car passed in a swift rush of sound and she was again alone in the darkness.

The moon was rising, she could make out the broken fence rail that marked the boundary of Paul's land. When no other lights showed in the distance she slipped from the car and walked slowly along the fence until she came to the sagging remains of a gate. She struggled through waist high grass and weeds until her heels sank deep into a rut, she was jubilant, the road was still there. She hurried back to the car and again forced herself to wait for ten minutes. When no cars approached in either direction, she gunned the motor and turned into the field. The car jolted it's way to the top of the hill. Silhouetted against the skyline was the outline of the sagging barn. She pulled the car into it's shadows and climbed out.

She started through the field more by instinct than by what she could actually see. The moonlight made the high weeds look like a mass of trees. Half way down the hill she stumbled and fell. She lay wondering if she had broken her leg, if she was to be defeated after she had come this far by a stupid fall. She struggled up and hobbled a few painful steps, she could still walk, most of the pain centered around her knee. She stumbled on down the hill and there less than a yard away was the dim outline of the house and the gas station.

She walked slowly until her feet felt the gravel parking lot. She crossed it and was at the door of the small store room. She tried the screen door, it was open, they had never locked it. Who would come this far out into the country to rob a store which advertised sundries? She slipped inside the small store-room and slid against the wall until she could see Paul. His head was bent, his back turned toward her, he seemed deeply engrossed in something.

She looked past his head, she would have to chance someone passing and seeing her inside with Paul. If she acted quickly, she could risk being seen. Who could identify the back of a woman bent over a man? Then she had that wild exuberant feeling again. Between Paul and the window was a life sized cut out of a car, blocking the view both from outside and inside.

This was her night, she knew it was going to be all right now. Everything had clicked in her favor, the fall in the field had been the only unplanned thing to occur. She crossed the few feet separating her from Paul and stood facing him. He looked up startled, his mouth opening in a question. She placed the pillow over the mouth of the gun and fired. Blood gushed from a gaping hole where his eye had been. She drew back sickened, she hadn't known it would be this messy. She shuddered and was sick for a second, then the feeling of being free came uppermost and her twisting stomach settled.

She hurried out and as she reached the screen door, she stopped suddenly. What had Paul been writing that kept him from hearing or even sensing her approach? She ran back and reaching across his body carefully extracted the letter. The bottle of ink he had been using overturned and the black ink mingled on the counter with the thick pools of red blood. She stared horrified at it and turned away, the sickness rising in her throat. She forced her eyes away from the strange pool and looked at the old fashioned cash register. She had better make it look like robbery, that way they wouldn't go checking too much into Paul's past. She felt better now, all it took was a little self control. She opened the cash drawer and took the few bills and change and fled.

She drew to a stop in her own garage and for the first time looked at her reflection in the car mirror. Her face looked the same, there were some burrs on her coat, a large hole in the knee of her stocking, but other than that she could walk in anywhere and not show any traces of having killed a man. She tossed the coat with its clinging burrs on top of the carseat. It would be better if she walked through the garage without a coat. If anyone passed her, they would assume that she had come for something left inside the car. She jammed the gun and the crumpled bills and letter inside her purse and sauntered across the garage. The attendant still nodded over his reading. She marvelled at how easy it all had been. Exultant at her success, exhausted, but triumphant, she rode the back elevator to the kitchen entrance. It was all over and all finished now and forever.

The phone was ringing loudly. She could hear it as she stepped from the elevator. She rushed through the door and grabbed the wall phone. It was Julian, she glanced at the wall clock. It was eleven thirty, he was calling on time. Julian's voice was heavy with suspicion. "Where were you when I called half hour ago?"

She laughed, "I went out on the terrace and I was listening to that new Bach album and fell asleep. I wakened when the phone must have given its final ring. When I

got inside there was no one . . ." She hoped she sounded convincing, she was glad he could not see her. She held the receiver toward the loud sounds coming from the terrace.

Julian laughed, "I can hear it, you must have the phone on the terrace, you're no true long hair or else you wouldn't be able to sleep with all that."

She sagged against the kitchen counter. He believed her. "I guess not dear, but I'm trying."

"I was lucky again or else this guy is broke, he sold and at my price. I'll be in Thursday earlier, in time for dinner. This is really my week."

She smiled, not his week, hers. She told him of the dinner party she had planned and hung up. She staggered away from the phone and out to the terrace to shut off the music. She would clean the gun and have a hot bath and a sedative, all of her troubles were over.

She pulled the gun from her purse and the crumpled letter fell to the floor. She picked it up and smoothed it out, she had forgotten about it. The words leaped at her, "Dear Alice: Good news at last, tomorrow the court will declare Gloria legally dead and we will be free to marry. I have always felt she was killed at the same time the police killed her lover. I had a strange experience the other day. One of those expensive jobs I never see stopped here for gas. The woman in the back seat was an identical

replica of Gloria, only she was blonde. She stared at me and it took my breath away. Remember how Gloria used to stare wide eyed at the teacher at school when she was caught cheating? This blonde sat up and gave me an identical stare. It frightened me, it would be just like Gloria to show up and wreck my life for a second time," the words trailed off, that would have been when he looked up and saw her standing there.

She stared at the letter for a long time, then ran to the incinerator and dropped it deep into the smoky depths. She leaned weakly against the kitchen wall, frozen and unfeeling. Slowly the futility of all she had done crept into her numbed senses. If she could have read the letter, she need not have risked so much, if she could have only known how Paul felt.

Her skinned knee began to burn and sting, bringing her sharply back to reality. She limped to the bathroom to bathe it. Seated on the bathtub she looked at the spreading bruise and began to laugh. It had suddenly become very funny. She had killed a man who only wanted to be rid of even the memory of her. She laughed until her aching sides caused her to stop for breath. She stood up and saw her reflection in the mirror of the medicine chest and grew frightened. A wild eyed white stranger stared at her, she turned away from the mirror, the echoes of her mad laughter still

lingered in her ears, some of it still seemed to be in the corners of the room. She fled into the bedroom, glad the apartment was sound proof, glad she was alone.

She sat down and leaned against a chair back, it would take a little while to get calm, something scratched her cheek. She reached out to see what it was, a twig dangled from her hair. Frightened she began to scrutinize every inch of her clothing and body. There might be other twigs, other pieces of dirt, or even blood. For the second time that night she made a hurried trip to the incinerator and dropped her muddied shoes, torn stocking and wrinkled dress down into it. She cleaned the gun while the tub filled with steaming water. She mustn't let go again, it was all over now.

When Julian returned, the memory of the crime was buried deep inside with the laughter. They decided to have the party on the terrace, as she was bent lighting the candles, Julian slipped up behind her and something cold slid against the back of her neck. Frightened she whirled, he was slipping a necklace which shone like fire around her bare throat. She grabbed it and shrieked her pleasure. There was no notice of his thick fingers now, no inner revulsion.

She was the center of an admiring group of women when the maid came out to the terrace and walked over to Julian. Lynette looked at her, annoyed. If it were

someone for Julian why hadn't she kept them waiting in the foyer? The girl looked frightened and gestured to the two men who had followed her out to the terrace. The taller man held something out to Julian.

From where she was standing it looked like a pillow to Lynette. She walked over to where Julian and the men stood. He was asking Julian something about a robbery. She looked at the pillow . . . and knew.

The young man had come back to her room and was standing by her bed. His eyes were so gentle and compassionate, he asked softly, "Do you want to tell me about it now?"

Lynette stared at him. She had just told him. It was all so clear the way she had told it. What else did he want? She tried to ask him, but the laughter was there choking her, she had to let it out.



OVERNIGHT GUEST



The sheriff turned sympathetic eyes toward Sam Swanson. "Sam," he said, "I don't know how many times I've warned you about picking up hitchhikers."

BY

**FREDERICK
CHAMBERLAIN**

HE WAS sitting on a battered suitcase by the side of the road, idly watching a stream of ants shuttling back and forth between their hole and the crust of bread he had thrown on the ground. It reminded him of the work he had hated in the penitentiary. The pen was a long way behind him now, and he grinned when he thought about how he had made his getaway. Dumb screws. One thing for sure; he wasn't going back there if he could help it. Once he got to Seattle he'd get lost for good.

He leaped to his feet when he

saw the old pick-up truck coming down the highway. He raised his thumb and his spirits soared as the pitch of the engine changed, slowed, and the truck growled to a halt a few feet beyond where he was standing. Grabbing the suitcase he sprinted for the opened door, and with a smile on his face climbed into the dusty seat beside the driver.

As he always did, he quickly sized the sucker up. This one was a middle-aged creep, a plow jockey no doubt, judging from the faded and worn levis, the denim shirt, and the weather-beaten, sweat-stained straw hat. A real hayseed.

"Hi!" he said. "Sure thank you for stopping. I've been standing there for quite a while. Thanks a lot!"

"You're welcome, son," the man said. "I'm not goin' very far, but you're sure welcome to ride."

The farmer let the clutch out and the truck rattled down the road.

Son. Always they got to call you son. The jerk probably ain't even going into the next hick town.

"Every little bit helps," he said. He wasn't kidding, either, for he had begun to believe that he was going to be stuck out there in the sticks all night, and from the looks of the sky it was going to rain before long.

"Where you headin', son?" the driver asked.

"Well," he answered, settling

back in the seat comfortably, "to tell you the truth—nowhere in particular." The skies were becoming darker, both from the coming night and the threat of the storm. "I'll know when I get there." He smiled at the man.

Always they got to call you son. Always they got to know where you're going. Hal This hayseed should only know about me. He'd flip.

The driver looked at him and chuckled. "Well, I'll say one thing—you don't seem to be worryin' none."

"Nothing to worry about," came the carefree answer. "I just like to travel. Been like that ever since I got out of the army. I guess some day I'll get it out of my system, but I ain't worrying about it yet."

You bet I like to travel. The more distance I can get between me and that pen the better I'll like it.

"Seems to me a good lookin' young feller like you'd be lookin' around for a wife and thinkin' about settlin' down somewhere," the man said. "Ain't you got a girl who worries about you when you're out traveling like this?"

"Nah. Anyway, plenty of time for that," the young man said, smiling broadly. "I'm only twenty-three. I'm going to move around a while and see some of the sights before I start thinking about that."

"Ain't you got any family? How about your ma and pa?"

Nosy old bastard. "They don't worry about me."

A brilliant, jagged streak of lightning sliced the sky ahead of them, followed by an ear-splitting crack of thunder. A few raindrops the size of a nickel splattered on the dusty windshield.

"Man!" the hitchhiker exclaimed. "Looks like I've had it! Caught out here in the rain, and night coming on. Nobody'll pick a guy up in the rain. It's bad enough at night—but night and rain-man!" The truck began slowing. "Oh, well—it won't be the first time."

The driver turned into a rutty dirt road leading into the hills, and stopped.

"Well, this's as far as I'm goin'," the farmer said. "But I'll tell you what, son. You look like a pretty decent sort of kid. I'll put you up for the night—give you some supper and breakfast, too. Hate to see anybody stranded, with a storm comin' up." He looked at the skies. "Sure been needin' rain, though."

Thinking with the rapidity of the desperate, the young man said, "I'd sure appreciate it, sir, if it won't be too much trouble."

What a break. It's a good twenty miles to the next town.

His experiences today had shown him that there just weren't many cars that traveled this road. The ones that did didn't pick up many hitchhikers, if his luck had been a sample. The ones who did

pick you up weren't going anywhere. *I'll be glad when I get to the coast.*

"No trouble at all," the man said; he started the truck up the dirt road. "What's your name, son?"

"Ray Ashby," he said, smiling.

The name of the screw he had slugged, back at the pen, was the first one that popped into his mind. Maybe because his first name was Ray, too.

"Mine's Sam—Sam Swanson. Might as well know what to call each other." He reached over and held out his hand.

The farmhouse was a big one, and well kept; not at all like the rattletrap truck. The house spoke eloquently of money. The rolling, fertile fields showed the expert touch of a true craftsman of the soil, as did the neatly painted barns and outbuildings; the clean and carefully parked tractors and machinery. The work of a woman's hand was evident, too, in the shining surface of the side porch, the well tended lawn and flower beds. This was a prosperous farm, not just an ordinary, run-of-the-mill place. A gleaming Cadillac convertible stood in pink and chrome splendor by the side of the house. Ray couldn't imagine the hayseed behind the wheel of a pink Caddy convertible. He paused for a moment, and surveyed the scene.

What I couldn't do with that Caddy!

"Come on in, boy," Sam Swan-

son said, holding the screen door open, waiting for Ray. "She's goin' to pour like blue-blazes in a minute."

He was right. They had barely gotten inside the house when the skies opened and poured the water down as though there was a limited time in which to empty themselves. The rain hammered and pounded on the roof like a berserk waterfall. Ray was glad to be here. Rain isolated people in the country at night, and he could use a little privacy for the matter gradually taking shape in his mind. Somehow . . . he was going to make a score here before he left.

These hayseeds have always got some cash around someplace.

The lightning danced and cavorted across the darkened skies, and the giant hands of thunder applauded their immediate approval of the dazzling display.

"Set your suitcase down there, boy," Sam said. Turning, he called, "Ella! Ella! Come here! We've got company for supper!" Swinging back to Ray, he said, "Ella's my wife's step-sister. My wife's an invalid, and Ella's been stayin' here and helpin' out with things."

Ray gasped, silently, when the woman came from the other room. He could imagine her in the Cadillac all right. Whatever he had expected to see he didn't know, but he certainly hadn't expected to see a woman like the one facing him now. A good-looking babe; a hon-

ey-blonde, with a voluptuous figure, dressed in a simple print house dress, but with the casually-careful attention to grooming that some women give only to an evening gown. She was one of those women proud of her sex—who displayed it—and so endowed by nature that she would have made a gunny sack look "up town." Her full, ripe lips were made for kissing, and though she was about ten years older than Ray, he couldn't help being aware of her womanly appeal . . . to him . . . to any man. But the eyes . . . were something else. Gray-green in color, deep and mysteriously unfathomable. Somehow, Ray could *feel* her eyes, and for no reason at all, a little shiver ran up his spine.

What a sexy bitch! Man! What a piece that would be! Maybe I can arrange for a little of that before I leave here, too.

"Ella, this is Ray Ashby," Sam said. "Ray's goin' to stay with us tonight."

Ray missed the wordless conversation carried on, briefly, by the eyes of Sam and the woman; but he didn't miss the way she looked at him, and his pulse quickened. *Maybe this won't be too hard.*

"Hello, Ray," she said, huskily, extending her hand.

The voice fitted her perfectly, he thought. He wasn't accustomed to shaking hands with women, and was a bit flustered when he took hers.

"How do you do, ma'am?" he said. The feel of her hand didn't match her appearance—or her voice. It was as cold as ice—like her eyes. He felt the slight, unmistakable squeeze she gave his hand.

"Hope you can stand my cooking," she said, with a smile.

"Is that company, Sam?" a woman's voice called weakly from somewhere above them.

A look of annoyance touched Sam's face momentarily. He glanced at Ella and walked to the foot of the stairs leading to the floor above.

"Yes, dear," he called to the unseen woman. "A young man I picked up on the highway and brought home for supper."

For the first time Ray saw something in Sam Swanson's eyes other than simple kindness.

A spasm of coughing came from above.

Turning back to the room, Sam said, "Supper ready, Ella?"

"Yes, Sam," she said. "You men come on."

The look had fled from Sam's eyes. "I'm hungry as a bear," he said. "Want to wash up, son?"

"Yes, sir," Ray said, and followed Sam into the spotlessly clean, modern bathroom.

"Make yourself at home, boy," Sam said. He opened a closet door and took out a clean towel and washcloth. He handed them to Ray and said, "Whenever you're

ready, we'll eat. Ella's a mighty fine cook." He went back to where Ella was dishing up their supper.

Ray ran the wash basin full of water and inspected himself in the mirror. He could see behind him, through the hall and into the kitchen where Sam had gone. He could see Sam and Ella in each other's arms. It came as a shock to him, yet he had, somehow, suspected as much. *She's just that kind of hot-pants woman.* He smiled a little, but felt an unreasonable twinge of jealousy, too. The smile froze when he thought about the woman upstairs. Sam's wife, and Ella's step-sister. *What a couple of cruds.* He splashed noisily in the water. *I'll bet her heart's as black as the ace of spades. This'll be easy.*

Ray lay awake in the big, soft, comfortable bed, watching the lightning, more gentle and sedate now, and listened to the steady drone of the rain on the roof over his head. He'd wait another hour or so before he made his move. He pondered the situation in this house: A man, obviously a rich old goat, and a sexy broad young enough to be his daughter. A bed-ridden wife. *Even hayseeds have the morals of alley cats. What that broad needs is Sam's money and me.* He could see them now—breezing down the highway in the pink Cad. Without intending to, he fell asleep.

Suddenly he awakened, angry with himself for maybe spoiling

his chances at a good take. He had no idea how long he had been asleep. For a moment he lay still, his eyes wide open and staring into the darkness so he could get his eyes accustomed to things in the room. The rain had stopped, he realized, as he remembered the events leading to his being here in this house, in this strange bed. The house was quiet; it was time to get to work if he was going to make anything out of this at all. *Bet that broad's in the sack with that old goat.*

A pale mellow light filtered into the room through the window from the gradually appearing moon outside. *Good. I won't have to stumble around in the dark.*

It was then he noticed his door was open. He distinctly remembered closing it when he had come upstairs. Then he noticed it was being slowly and cautiously closed by a dimly outlined figure that he knew, instinctively, to be that of Sam Swanson!

He watched the slowly moving door, fascinated into silence and immobility, much as the cobra is dazed by the gently swaying, softly playing flute in the hands of the Hindu charmer. When the door was fully closed he heard the key being carefully turned in the lock. He felt that something was terribly wrong.

What the hell's he locking the door for?

Alarmed, Ray threw the covers

back, climbed stealthily out of bed, and tip-toed, barefooted, to the door. He stood there in the dark, placed his ear against the cold wood, and strained to hear what was going on.

Beyond the door, somewhere in the hallway, he could feel, more than hear, the muted vibrations of whispering voices. As his ears became tuned to the sibilant sounds, he could recognize one of the voices as Sam's and the other as that of Ella.

From Sam: "He's asleep. You sure you know what to do?"

From Ella: "Yes, Oh, Sam! We've waited so long. This is our chance. Don't back out now!"

Ray gave a fleeting thought to the incompatibility of a voice so sexy and so deadly. *Deadly?* He started, wondering how the word had slipped into his mind.

"Don't worry, honey," Sam whispered. "Now remember, when you call the sheriff, you've got to make it sound good. You've got to put on the act of your life."

Sheriff? What the hell?

"You think we can get away with it, Sam?" he heard Ella ask. "You think we can make it look like he did it?"

What the hell's going on here?

"If I wasn't sure, I wouldn't be tryin' it." There was impatience in Sam's voice. "You leave it to me. You just remember your part."

Ray felt the hair on the back of his neck bristle in fear. He wasn't

positive yet, what was going on, but an awful, monstrous thing was taking shape in his mind, blotting out all ideas he had of larceny; killing any ideas he had of getting into bed with Ella. He strained his ears to hear the rest of their whispered conversation, but they had moved away from the door and he couldn't hear a sound. He sensed a terrible danger, but couldn't pin it down. Cautiously, he tried the door. It was locked all right. Hastily he dressed in the darkness, for he felt an urge to get away from there—away from Sam and Ella.

He heard footsteps in the room next to his. Distinctly, he heard a woman's voice: "Who is it? Sam? Is that you, Sam? What . . . ?" and the voice gurgled and died in mid-air. He could hear sounds of a violent struggle. Someone was breathing hard—sucking in great gulping mouthfuls of air. Between the gasps for breath he could hear thudding blows.

Sam's voice, hissing: "Die! Damn you! Die!"

An unholy silence pounded on Ray's ears, as he realized he had just been an "ear-witness" to Sam Swanson's murder of his invalid wife!

Horrified, his mind wrestled with the brain-numbing facts of what was happening. Faintly, he heard a ripping sound, as of cloth being torn. He wondered if it was a part of the diabolical plan to point the finger of guilt at him.

He stood there, petrified with fear. He could hear Ella ask, "Are you sure she's dead?" There was hopeful anxiety in her voice.

"She's dead all right," Sam answered. "Now for the punk."

The sound of a rifle bolt being jerked backward . . . and then slammed home, footsteps coming out of the room, down the hall and stopping before his door brought on a panic of fear that exploded him into action.

Ray ran to the window, paused for a moment, thinking about his suitcase. *To hell with it!* He flung the window up, hung from the sill by his fingertips, and dropped to the ground in the darkness. He hit with a jolt and fell backwards. He leaped to his feet and ran with the winged speed of terror.

He heard violent, savage cursing from the window; then the crackling of frantically fired shots ripped the air around him. He could sense the slicing bullets probing for his back, and heard the snarling whine of a ricochet. A white-hot finger of pain touched his left thigh, and he knew he was hit. Without breaking stride, he smashed head-on into a barbed wire fence, felt the needles jab and slash his body, and was flung to his back on the muddy ground.

"Stop him, Sam!" he heard Ella scream. "He's getting away!"

"Call the sheriff! Send the party-line signal!" Sam screamed at her. "Tell 'em to bring a posse—fast! I'm

goin' after him! He can't get far."

"Oh my god!" Ella wailed. "Stop him! Kill him! Kill him!"

Dazed and bleeding, Ray crawled painfully through the wire. He got to his feet and ran again, heading for the shadowy outline of some trees. The mud sucked and pulled at his feet, as though part of the plan to trap him. Great gasps for air, and sobs of fear tore from his throat. He felt like an animal fleeing for his life.

He killed her and is going to pin it on me! I never even saw her!

If Sam didn't kill him the posse would hunt him down like a dog, and he'd go before a judge and jury of strangers. With his record he wouldn't have a chance. He wished he was back in his cell at the pen.

Blindly, he ran across the fields until he thought his lungs would burst. When he felt the stinging lashes across his face, he knew he had blundered into some kind of thicket. Like a frightened rabbit burrowing into a blackberry patch, he floundered deeper and deeper into the entangling underbrush. Finally, unable to run another step, he crashed to his face and lay there, listening to the sounds of his own agonized breathing. His consciousness trailed away into a stupor of exhaustion and numbing shock.

How long he had lain there, he didn't know, but he was slowly becoming aware of sounds in the night. Memory flooded him to

alertness, but he remained immobile on the wet ground, straining for the signals of danger. He could hear the chirping of crickets around him and somewhere the gurgling of a stream. Pleasant sounds. He thought of his home for the first time in a long while, and wished he had never left it. He thought of the bad things he had done; of the warden and the penitentiary; of the guard he had slugged, he wished the police could help him. Nobody could help him. He tried to imagine this was a nightmare and he would awaken soon and everything would be all right.

He knew it wasn't a dream when he heard the first baying of the hounds in the distance.

Springing to his feet, he stared wildly down the slope in the direction from which he had come. He could see the lights of the farm house; the two-eyed lights of many automobiles; the hated blinking-red-lights that could only be those atop a police car or ambulance. Long, stabbing fingers of light were reaching out, exploring the hills and fields. Faintly, he could hear the eager, shouting voices of men as they prepared to hunt him down. Bobbing lights moved back and forth, held in the hands of the hunters, as they fanned out for the chase.

"It's a dirty, lousy, rotten, stinking frame!" he screamed into the night. The words throbbed from

the trees and hills in mockery.
Frame . . . frame . . . frame . . .

He thought of the game, "chase the rabbit," he had played as a child. He was the "rabbit," and he knew he wasn't going to get away.

He turned and ran blindly through the thicket, fighting the pulling, slashing, tugging briars. He broke free, into the woods, and ran in a great void of unreality. He fought back the urge to laugh at his predicament.

He could hear the tumbling, rushing water—nearer now—somewhere ahead and below him. Without knowing that a forty-foot cliff was before him, he ran headlong over the edge. As he clawed the empty air he heard someone scream. Vaguely, he realized the scream came from his own throat.

In a great explosion of light he hit, head first, on the rocks below, and as the light faded—in that flashing, infinitesimal part of an instant, as he looked dreamily into the black abyss, he thought of his last ride.

The sheriff pushed his way through the ring of grim-faced men and whining dogs. Shielding his eyes from the first rays of the morning sun slanting over the hill, he looked down at the torn, bleeding form of the youth on the ground.

He turned to Sam Swanson, and there was sympathy in his eyes for the man who had lost his wife to the hands of a killer, whom he had befriended.

"Sam," he said, "I don't know how many times I warned you about picking up hitchhikers."



CLEAR

ON
SENSE
SENSE

BY LAWRENCE HARVEY

It's strange . . . the things a woman can make a man do.

WELL, go ahead," Mona said nervously. "If you're going to do it, go ahead!"

I stood there in the darkness beside the car, breathing hard, wondering if what Mona and I were doing was the right thing. I was scared down to my shoes.

"Okay, okay," I said. "Don't get yourself worked up. That's all I need now! I'm not so sure this is such a hot idea, anyway."

"We've been all through that, Pete," she said.

"Yeah, I know and we've got to do it. I know that. I just wish it was over and done with, that's all."

The street was very quiet; only the occasional swishing of tires on the wet pavement broke through the late night stillness. Across the street, a flickering neon sign advertising beer shot long ribbons of intermittent light across the wetness of the pavement. At the far end of the street, I saw pale light in one of the windows of the building I was to enter. I glanced around furtively. "Keep the engine running," I said to Mona, then strode across the street at a brisk pace.

Keeping in the shadows, I made it to the door of the old building. The scene before me was a familiar one—the two story brick building that must have been constructed at the turn of the century, the narrow windows that a man could reach from the sidewalk and the sign over the main entrance that read: AMERICAN WHOLESALE CO. The safe would be in the office, I knew, unless some inconsiderate jerk had moved it since this afternoon when I got off from work.

I took a key from my pocket, stuck it in the old fashioned lock and opened the door. Quietly, I stepped into the building, closing the door behind me. Blackness engulfed me.

Finally, my eyes became used to the darkness and I found myself in a jungle of cardboard boxes stacked in irregular rows. I eased between the boxes, trying to get my bearings. A place sure does look different at night! For eight hours a day for over five years I had sweated blood in this place to make my measly little salary. Slowly, I made my way toward the office. A rat scurried across the floor, right at my feet, and it might just as well have been an elephant; it couldn't have scared me any more.

The door to the office was ajar and I eased it all the way open and went in. The safe sat in the far corner of the tiny room, partially hidden by the desk in front of it. I went to work on the safe. Knowing

the combination helped. Just as I twirled the dial to the last number and started to pull open the heavy door, I heard a slight scratching sound outside the office. Just a tiny sound, like shoe leather on rough flooring. I crouched down behind the desk, my old heart pumping double time, just in time to see a beam of light strike the wall behind me. I didn't even breathe. I just crouched there and waited.

The light played about the room, finally stopping in my corner, just above my head. Then the shrill voice of old Ben, the nightwatchman, pierced the silence, "Who's there?" I just waited, silently. Then footsteps made a path toward me. Panic swarmed all over me. When the footsteps came abreast of me, I reached out frantically, grabbing the old man's legs. I heard him grunt as he hit the hard floor. Then I was on top of him, pounding his face with my fists. I was desperate. My whole life could be ruined if he recognized me. He was strong for his age. We struggled for quite some time. I heard his gun hit the floor with a dull thud. Then his hands reached out for my throat and clamped down in a vise-like grip. I couldn't get away. The very life was slowly draining from my body. In desperation, I reached out beside me and my hand fell upon the gun. I grabbed it and struck out viciously at the back of his head. I must have hit him seven or eight times. Finally, the big hands loos-

ened about my throat and the old man slumped across me. I pushed him away and got up, knowing then that he was dead.

I just stood there in the darkness, breathing hard, trying to convince myself that this thing that had just happened wasn't a horrible nightmare, but the real thing. Finally, when I had regained my composure, I opened the safe, reached inside quickly, then shut it and locked it.

I didn't waste much time getting the hell out of there. When I reached the street again, locking the door behind me, I realized that I was shaking like a leaf in a persistent breeze. But I was mighty glad it was all over. Sweat was pouring down my cheeks but the cool night air bathed me about the face and felt good. I stayed in the deep shadows of the building until I was certain no one was around, then I pulled my hat way down over my face and headed across the street where Mona was waiting.

Mona had the engine idling. She opened the door for me and I got in. Once inside the car, I felt relief surge through me. Still, the repugnance of what I had done to the old man stuck like a fish bone in my throat. I glanced over at Mona. *You talked me into this, I thought. If it*

hadn't been for you. . . . A woman can sure make a man do some mighty strange things.

She pulled away from the curb smoothly, turning the next corner. Glancing over at me, she asked, "Did it come off all right, Pete?"

"Sure," I lied. "No trouble at all." I just didn't feel like going into detail with Mona about what had happened. I was too sick inside.

She maneuvered the Chev down Main street toward our little apartment in the Elite arms which wasn't so elegant as maybe the name implied. Actually, it was a crummy joint but on my salary, it was all I could afford.

"It wasn't so bad now, was it?" Mona said, smiling.

"No," I replied.

"Glad you did it, Pete?"

"Sure. I'd do anything for you, Mona. You know that."

We rode on in silence for a while. Then Mona said, "I'm glad it's over, Pete. You're not really a thief. I don't know what made you think you had to steal to get things for me." Then she looked at me and smiled as only Mona could, saying, "Don't you feel better now that you've put the money back? A clear conscience is a wonderful thing."

Yes, I thought, a wonderful thing.

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THE RED



HERRING

They hired Matt Gannon to find a senile old man who had a penchant for pretty young women . . . and a gift for making bombs.

A Novelette

BY RICHARD DEMING

THE Holt and Bancroft Manufacturing Company was a long, one-story brick building with a truck ramp at one end. Matt Gannon walked up the ramp, past the open double doors of a shipping room to a door just beyond it which had a sign above it reading: OFFICE. A bell tinkled when he opened this door and went in.

A platinum blonde of about thirty was seated at a desk behind a low counter. She possessed both a stunning figure and a lovely face, but she was so made up she looked enameled. Pancake makeup, crimson lip rouge and blue eye mascara were laid on with a heaviness which would have been more appropriate for a nightclub stripper than a business-office receptionist.

Glancing up at the sound of the bell, the woman flashed Gannon a

show-business smile. "Good morning," she said throatily.

"Morning. I'm Matt Gannon."

The blonde's smile widened. "How do you do? I'm Alice Emory."

"A pleasure," Gannon said gravely, and waited.

The blonde waited too, her gaze moving over his rangy frame with interest. It settled on the sunbleached forelock which he could never keep from curling downward across his forehead in an unruly wave, no matter how often he combed it back. This seemed to intrigue her, for her eyes remained fixed on it.

"Matt Gannon, the private investigator," he prompted.

Her gaze dropped to his eyes. "You're a private detective?" she asked in a delighted tone.

He said patiently, "Mr. Holt's expecting me. He said just to give my name."

"Oh, you have an appointment with Mr. Holt? He didn't mention it."

"Well, I'm mentioning it," Gannon said, still patient. "Will you ring his office, please?"

"He's not in his office," Alice Emory said. "He's in Mr. Bancroft's."

Gannon tired of the game. Glancing around, he saw three doors at the far end of the room. The center one, glass-paned, he could see led to a hall. On either side of it were doors paned with frosted glass. One was lettered EDMUND HOLT, PRESIDENT, the other ARTHUR BANCROFT, VICE PRESIDENT.

Murmuring, "I'll find him, thanks," Gannon headed toward the door labeled ARTHUR BANCROFT.

The blonde's smile disappeared. "Wait!" she called. "I'll have to announce—"

The rest of it was cut off because Gannon had opened the door, walked in and shut it behind him.

Two men of about fifty were in the room. The man behind the desk had the trim figure and outdoor tan of an athlete. Iron gray hair worn in a crew-cut framed a face cut from granite. The other man, leaning against a file cabinet alongside the desk, was soft and plump, with a double chin and a little round bald

spot at the rear of his head. A pair of gold-rimmed glasses rode far forward on a long nose too thin for his plump face.

The granite-faced man frowned at Gannon. The plump man merely looked surprised.

"I'm Matt Gannon," the investigator said. "Your receptionist didn't seem to want to announce me, so I came on in." He looked at the plump man. "You Edmund Holt?"

The man nodded. "That woman," he said testily. "As a receptionist she ranks about zero."

Gannon said, "She wasn't expecting me. According to her, you forgot to mention our appointment."

"I left a note on her desk," Holt said with a touch of heat. "As usual, she was off on a coffee break. It wouldn't occur to her to read anything left lying on her desk." He turned to the other man. "Art, how long—"

"She does her job," the granite-faced man interrupted. "Why don't you get off her back?"

Edmund Holt made an irritated gesture. Turning back to Gannon, he said, "We've been having a little disagreement about my engaging you, Mr. Gannon. Art—" He paused, then completely changed direction. "But I haven't even introduced you. This is my partner, Arthur Bancroft."

"How are you?" Gannon inquired, and was rewarded with a distant nod.

Edmund Holt said uncomfortably, "Art isn't very enthusiastic about my calling in a private detective. He doesn't think we're in any real danger."

Gannon said in a cold voice, "When you make up your mind, give me a ring," and turned to leave.

"Wait," Holt said hurriedly. "I want to engage you on my own, even if he doesn't agree."

Gannon slowly turned around again. "Then suppose we go into your own office."

Arthur Bancroft said on a faint note of begrudging apology, "I didn't mean to be rude, Gannon. It's just that I think my partner is blowing up a tempest in a teapot. Sit down and we'll explain the situation to you. I think you'll agree with me."

With a shrug Gannon moved to a chair before the desk, seated himself and lit a cigarette. "Go ahead. I'm listening."

Plump Edmund Holt said, "A little background information is necessary for you to understand the situation. Do you know anything about our company?"

"You manufacture electronic devices, don't you?"

The plump man nodded. "One of our biggest items in recent years had been a cheap, compact radiation detection device similar to the Geiger-Muller Counter, but based on a different principle. Originally we planned to manufacture it for

amateur uranium prospectors, but we were able to produce it so cheaply that department stores all over the country stock it in their toy departments. It's sensitive enough to pick up the radiation from a luminous watch dial, yet it retails for only about three dollars. It isn't really a toy, but kids seem to go wild over it. It's made us a great deal of money."

"Uh-huh," Gannon said.

"The device was invented by a man named Gerald Greene. As a matter of fact it's called the Greene Radiation Counter. We bought the patent from him about five years ago. It was an entirely legal transaction, but he feels he was cheated."

"What did you pay for it?"

There was a period of silence before the man behind the desk said dryly, "Five hundred dollars."

Gannon hiked his eyebrows. "Outright? With no royalty clause?"

Edmund Holt said in an embarrassed voice, "It was a speculation. We had no way of knowing it would be so successful. We contemplated the sale of perhaps a few hundred units to uranium prospectors, and we risked several thousand dollars in just tooling up to manufacture it. Greene understood the speculative nature of our investment. If it hadn't accidentally clicked as a toy, he would think he made a good deal."

Arthur Bancroft said sardonically, "Stop trying to whitewash the

deal, Ed. We took Greene. It was all legal, but nevertheless we took him." He turned stony eyes on Gannon. "In most legitimate business deals somebody gets the worst of it. I have no apology to make for being a smarter businessman than Greene. We got the patent as cheaply as we possibly could. Any other manufacturer would have done the same thing. It's called private enterprise."

Gannon leaned across the desk to punch out his cigarette. He said dryly, "And now you think Greene's out for revenge?"

"Think?" Holt said. "He means to kill us."

Straightening, Gannon looked at the plump man. "He's threatened you?"

"See what you think. Show him the letter, Art."

The granite-faced man reached into his top desk drawer and brought out an envelope. He handed it to Gannon.

The envelope hadn't come through the mail, for there was no stamp nor postmark on it. Typewritten on it was: *Edmund Holt and Arthur Bancroft*. Below that was typed: *Personal*.

Removing the single folded sheet inside the envelope, Gannon noted that it too was typed. It read:

Dear Vultures:

At last count my little invention had made your company a net profit of a hundred and twenty thousand dollars. How are you

going to spend that in Hell? It interests me, because that's where you're going.

The note was unsigned.

Looking up, the private investigator asked. "What makes you so sure this is from Gerald Greene?"

Bancroft said, "He personally brought it in and left it with our receptionist. He didn't give his name, and she'd never seen him before, because she wasn't with us at the time we had dealings with Greene. But her description of the man tallies with Greene's. Besides, the Greene Radiation Counter has made us about a hundred and twenty thousand in the past five years, so obviously that's the invention referred to."

"When was this delivered?"

"Yesterday morning," Bancroft said. "We were both in our offices, but he didn't ask to see us. He just handed the envelope to Alice and asked her to make sure we got it."

Gannon thoughtfully pushed back his forelock, only to have it instantly fall forward again. "This isn't necessarily a threat. Maybe he means you're both going to Hell when you eventually die of natural causes."

Edmund Holt gave his head an emphatic shake. "It isn't the first threat. Two years ago he hired a lawyer to see what he could do about getting more money out of us. It never got to court, but the lawyer called us in for a conference. When we showed him the

contract, he advised Greene that he didn't have a leg to stand on. Greene went into a rage. He screamed that he'd kill us both."

Gannon said dubiously, "Then he waited two years to carry out the threat? And decided to warn you of what's coming?"

"He told us he'd warn us," Holt said. "I remember his exact words. He yelled, 'It won't be today or tomorrow. Maybe I'll have to wait years. But I'll kill you vultures if it's the last thing I do. And I'll let you know when it's coming, so you can sweat a while.' This letter is his way of letting us know."

Gannon refolded the note and thrust it back into its envelope. He eyed the man behind the desk curiously. "Why are you so willing to dismiss this, Bancroft? What makes you so sure he isn't dangerous?"

"The man's sixty-seven years old and weighs about a hundred and twenty-five pounds," Bancroft said with contempt.

"That's big enough to squeeze a trigger."

Bancroft made a dismissing gesture. "I think he's senile. I can't take the threat of a doddering old man seriously."

The investigator shrugged. "Have you showed this to the police?"

Both men shook their heads. Holt said, "I thought a private detective would be more discreet. I do take the threat seriously. Will you look into the matter for me,

even if Art isn't interested in engaging you?"

Gannon said a trifle gruffly, "Frankly I don't have much sympathy for either of you. It seems obvious that you cheated the old man outrageously. But even sharp dealers have the right of protection against cranks. I'll check up on the man."

Arthur Bancroft frowned at the private detective's blunt words, but Holt merely looked faintly embarrassed.

Gannon said, "Where do I find him?"

"We haven't the faintest idea," Holt said. "He moved from town right after his unsuccessful attempt to shake us down. We didn't know he was back until he brought the note in yesterday."

"What's his last known address?"

"We don't even have that on file. He had moved from the address in the contract at the time we met with his lawyer. Perhaps the lawyer would know. He's a man named Marcus Wade in the Bland Building."

Gannon took a small notebook and a pencil from his pocket. "Description?"

Holt said, "Art's already given you his age and weight. He's about five eleven, thin, slightly stooped and has a full head of white hair. He has blue eyes and wears thick-lensed horn-rimmed glasses."

After jotting the information down, Gannon unfolded his long

form from his chair. Casually he stuffed the envelope containing the note into his inside breast pocket. Neither man made any objection.

"I'll give you a ring as soon as I locate him," he told Holt, and walked out.

CHAPTER II

In the outer office the blonde Alice Emory said with a pout, "I bet you got me in trouble."

"I tried," Gannon said. "But Mr. Bancroft seems to like you."

She gave him an unconcerned grin. "He's nice, isn't he? Not like Mr. Holt."

If Holt had his way, she'd be fired, Gannon thought. He wondered if the woman knew she was a source of disagreement between the partners.

Taking out the envelope and showing it to the girl, he said, "I understand this was delivered to you yesterday."

Peering at it, she nodded. "About ten A.M. by an old man."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing much. He just asked me to be sure both partners saw it. I took it in to Mr. Holt."

"How did the old man act? I mean was his manner pleasant, or angry, or what?"

A thoughtful expression grew on her face. "Sort of formal, I'd say. He was very polite."

"How was he dressed?"

She thought for another moment

before saying, "Kind of shabbily. He wore an old seersucker suit and his shirt collar was frayed."

Gannon contemplated her for a moment, then remarked, "You're not a very curious woman, Alice."

Her plucked eyebrows went up. "Why do you say that?"

"Don't you wonder why I'm asking all these questions?"

Gannon got the impression that she flushed, though her pancake makeup was too heavy for the flush to show, so he couldn't be sure.

She said primly, "I was waiting for you to finish. If you're finished, I'll ask. What's this all about?"

"Just routine," Gannon said with a grin, and continued on out.

Marcus Wade was a thin, dark man with horn-rimmed glasses. He greeted Gannon with cordial reserve, asked him to have a seat, then placed the tips of his fingers together and stared at the investigator expectantly.

Gannon handed over his license. When the lawyer had examined it and had returned it without comment, Gannon said, "I'm trying to locate an ex-client of yours. A man named Gerald Greene."

When the lawyer looked blank, Gannon added, "An inventor who wanted to sue *Holt and Bancroft Manufacturing* a couple of years back."

"Oh, yes," Wade said, light dawning in his eyes. "We only had a couple of contacts. He didn't have

any case at all. I don't believe he's in town any more, but I can give you a two-year-old address, if you think that would help."

Rising, he went to a file cabinet, searched and drew out a manila folder. He read off an address on Franklin Avenue. "I think it's a rooming house," he added.

Gannon scribbled the address in his notebook. Thanking the attorney, he left.

As Marcus Wade had suggested, the Franklin Avenue address was a rooming house. The landlady informed Gannon that Greene had moved eighteen months previously. He had left a forwarding address in Indianapolis.

By then it was lunch time, so Gannon stopped for a bite to eat, then checked into his office on Figueroa Street in downtown Los Angeles. It was only a cubbyhole of a place, but it was clean and well ventilated and the ancient furnishings were in relatively good condition. A cumbersome oak desk took up half the small room. Next to it, so that he could swing around without rising from his desk chair, was a standard typewriter on a stand. Against one wall were three gray file cabinets. The only other furnishings were a client chair in front of the desk and three more lined up against the wall.

Seating himself behind the desk, he called his answering service. There had been no calls. Then he called information. There was no

local phone listed under the name Gerald Greene. His next call was station-to-station to the Indianapolis address given him by Greene's former landlady. A pleasant female voice answered:

"My name is Mathew Gannon," he said. "I'm calling from Los Angeles. I'm trying to locate a Gerald Greene."

"My goodness!" the woman said. "He hasn't lived here for a year."

"Are you a relative?" Gannon asked.

"I'm the landlady. This is a rooming house."

"Do you have his present address?"

"Why, I suppose he's still at the State Hospital."

"The State Hospital?"

"The mental hospital. That's where he went from here. He was committed after the arrest, you know."

"No, I didn't," Gannon said. "What arrest?"

"When he was picked up for molesting all those women."

"I see," Gannon said. "Where is this hospital?"

"Right here in town. Hold on a minute and I'll look up the number for you."

There was a few moments of silence, then the woman reeled off a telephone number. Jotting it down, Gannon thanked her and hung up.

He placed a person-to-person call to the hospital superintendent and got through almost at once.

"Dr. Cordovan," a crisp voice said in his ear.

Gannon explained who he was and that he was trying to locate Gerald Greene.

"I remember the man," the superintendent said. "He was released as cured about two weeks ago. I'd have to know why you want him before we can release any information, however."

"I'm trying to keep him out of trouble," Gannon said. "He's here in Los Angeles and he's threatened a couple of people. I don't know his local address, so I'm checking back. I thought you might have it."

"He's been threatening people?" the doctor said in surprise. "We don't consider him dangerous."

"He has an old grudge against these particular people. Do you have an address?"

"I can look it up. As I recall, he went to live with a relative down your way. The reason I remember him is that he was moving out of state. Released mental patients have to get special permission to leave the state within a year of their release. And there has to be unusual circumstances before we'll permit it. In this case there was no place else for him to go and he had insufficient funds to take care of himself. Hold on while I pull his record."

After a few minutes' wait Dr. Cordovan returned to the phone. "The relative is a niece, the daughter of a deceased sister. Her name

is Mrs. Mona Jarvis." He read off an address in the twenty-nine-hundred block of Ashbury Street in Los Angeles.

Gannon scribbled down the address. "Why was he committed, Doctor?"

"Well, the immediate reason was that he was picked up several times for following strange women and making indecent suggestions. But the diagnosis was premature senility. Greene was once a brilliant man, I understand, a sort of self-educated scientist. He once invented some kind of electronic device which he sold for pennies, but was extremely successful commercially. But in recent years he's started to go into what you laymen call second childhood. An unnatural preoccupation with sex is a common symptom of senility among men who are not really aged physically. When I say he was released as cured, what I really mean is that we don't consider him dangerous. His interest in sex is all in his head. It's extremely unlikely that he'd attack any woman. But he isn't really cured. You don't cure senility."

"I see," Gannon said. "Thanks a lot, Doctor."

"You're welcome," Cordovan said. "I hope you manage to locate him in time to keep him out of serious trouble."

Hanging up, Gannon left the office, locking the door behind him.

The house on Ashbury Street was a small, neat, one-story home

with a white picket fence around it. A dark young woman with a sleeping baby in her arms sat on a porch swing.

Mounting the porch steps, Gannon asked, "You Mrs. Jarvis?"

"That's right," she said with a pleasant smile. Her gaze fixed on his sun-bleached forelock and he selfconsciously pushed it back. It didn't stay.

"I'm looking for Gerald Greene," he said. "I understand he's your uncle and stays here."

The smile disappeared. "My husband and I are looking for him too, mister. You a cop?"

"Private." He held his license before her.

She examined it dubiously. "Mathew Gannon, eh? Pleased to meet you, Mr. Gannon. What's Uncle Jerry done? Woman trouble again?"

Gannon said mildly, "I just want to talk to him."

The woman blew a fly from the sleeping baby's forehead. "So would I. He was supposed to come back last night."

"Back from where?"

"He was invited to some fishing lodge over the weekend. An old friend, he said, but he just brushed me off when I asked who. Said I wouldn't know the man. As excited as he was, I half suspected it was really a woman. In Indianapolis a while back he was in trouble for bothering women, you know. I thought maybe he'd finally run

into some woman who took him up instead of yelling cop. Then I decided that was silly. What woman would want a sixty-seven-year-old man, even with a roll of money?"

"He had some money?"

"About two hundred dollars. He said he'd collected an old debt. I don't know who it was that paid him."

Gannon thoughtfully pushed back his forelock again, only to have it flop back in place. "When did he leave for this fishing lodge?"

"About noon Saturday. Said he'd be back Monday night, but here it is Tuesday. He packed a weekend bag and took off in a taxi."

"Notice what kind?"

"A Yellow. Is he in some kind of trouble, Mr. Gannon?"

The investigator saw no point in worrying her. He said, "I've been retained to locate him by a company he once sold a patent to," which was the literal truth, insofar as it went.

"Oh," she said in a relieved tone. "Will there be some money involved?"

"I don't think it's likely," Gannon said dryly. "If he shows up, will you phone my office?" He handed her a card.

"Sure. Will you phone me if you catch up with him first?"

"Of course," he said. "Thanks for your time."

He walked back to the gate, pushed through it and climbed into his car. Mona Jarvis shifted the

baby in her arms and waved to him as he drove away.

CHAPTER III

Ashbury Street was a considerable distance from Gannon's office. He stopped at the first tavern he saw and phoned his answering service.

The girl on the switchboard at the answering service said, "You had a call not more than thirty seconds ago, Mr. Gannon. A Mr. Edmund Holt wants you to call his office right away. He says it's extremely urgent."

"Thanks," Gannon said. Hanging up, he dropped more money in the phone slot and dialed the *Holt and Bancroft Manufacturing Company*.

Alice Emory answered and put him through to Holt immediately.

"Hello, Holt," Gannon said. "What's up?"

"Can you meet me at my home right away?" Holt said tensely.

"Why?"

"My wife just phoned that a package came in the mail for me. We don't get our mail delivered until one P.M. She's a curious woman, so she started to open it, even though it was addressed to me. She stopped halfway and phoned me. She thinks it's a bomb."

Gannon said sharply, "Did you get her out of the house?"

"Of course. I told her to leave it right where it was—she started to

open it on the dining-room table—and get outside. She'll be waiting for us in front."

"What's the address?"

Gannon was glad he hadn't driven back to his office before checking with his answering service, because Holt lived on Fletcher Drive, just off San Fernando Road. The tavern from which he was phoning was on San Fernando Road about three fourths of the distance between his office and Holt's home.

"I'm not more than ten minutes from there," Gannon said. "I'll see if I can make it in five."

He made it in six minutes.

Edmund Holt's home was an expensive, two-story brick building with a spacious lawn around it. A plump, middle-aged woman in a house dress was standing on the sidewalk out front when Gannon pulled up.

Getting out of the car, he said, "Mrs. Holt?"

"Yes," she said nervously. "You must be Mr. Gannon. My husband said he was going to call you."

"He's on his way here too," Gannon said. "But we won't wait for him. Give me the layout of the house and tell me where the package is."

"It's on the dining-room table. Right inside the front door is a small lobby. Go left into the front room. There's an archway from there to the dining room."

"Okay," Gannon said. "I'll take a look. No one is inside, I hope."

She started to shake her head, suddenly looked horrified. "Stanley!"

"Who's Stanley?"

"My cat. My God, we've got to get Stanley out of there!"

She was starting toward the house when Gannon grabbed an elbow. "Take it easy, Mrs. Holt. I'll look for Stanley."

He strode up the walk, up the porch steps, took a deep breath, opened the screen door and went in. He let the screen door close gently behind him.

Cautiously he moved into the front room only far enough to lean forward and peer through the archway into the dining room. His blood curdled at the sight he saw there.

A small, narrow package about ten inches long, two wide and an inch high rested on the very edge of the table. The paper wrapping had been torn from one end of the package to expose two cylinders which looked remarkably like two half sticks of dynamite. A huge black tomcat sat on the table playfully slapping at the package with one paw.

As Gannon stood frozen, the package teetered over the table edge and fell.

Gannon did a back flip into the lobby, landing on his shoulders, making a complete somersault and as lightly as a cat coming to his feet again in the room across the lobby. Tensely he waited.

Nothing happened.

After a few moments he tiptoed across the lobby, leaned forward and peered through the archway again. The package lay on the floor. Crouched a few feet from it, ready to pounce, was the black cat.

"Skat!" Gannon hissed.

The cat came erect, his back arched and his tail shot straight upward. He hissed back.

Gannon took a step toward him. The cat broke for the kitchen and disappeared. Gannon retreated to the lobby again, glanced around and spotted a phone on a small end table. He dialed Madison 5-7911.

When a voice said, "Police department," Gannon said, "Homicide, please."

In Los Angeles the Homicide Division has twenty-one separate functions aside from the investigation of dead bodies. One of them is to investigate explosions. Technically their interest begins only after a bomb has gone off, but Gannon had a friend in Homicide and he was in no mood for splitting hairs. When someone answered the phone at Homicide, he asked for Lieutenant Harry Gloff.

A moment later the lieutenant's gruff voice said, "Gloff speaking."

"This is Matt Gannon, Harry. I've got a possible bomb for you. Better get the bomb squad over here fast."

"Where?" Gloff asked.

Gannon gave him the address. "Make it snappy, Harry. I have to

keep it in sight because there's a cat who thinks it's a toy."

"A what?"

"Cat. He just gave me heart failure by pushing it off a table. I scared him into the kitchen, but he may be back."

"You get in the damnedest situations," Gloff growled. "Stand by. I'll have the bomb-disposal squad moving in thirty seconds. You can give me the details later."

Within three minutes there was a radio car at the scene, but it was closer to twenty before the bomb-disposal truck pulled up in front of the house. Meantime Gannon took periodic peeks at the package on the dining-room floor. Once the tomcat appeared in the kitchen doorway, but another hissed "Skat" drove it away again.

Two men were on the bomb-disposal detail. They came in empty-handed, listened silently to Gannon's explanation of the situation, then one moved cautiously into the front room while the other waited in the lobby.

The first man returned and said, "Looks like a spring job. Luckily she opened the end where the detonator wasn't. Two half sticks of dynamite, it looks like. Guess we better put on the suits."

Gannon said, "There's a cat in the kitchen who thinks it's a toy. I'll stay here to keep him away until you're ready."

Both men shrugged. "Be back in a couple of minutes," the one who

had gone to look at the bomb said.

When they returned, they looked like men from outer space. Heavy asbestos suits encased them from head to toe and they wore steel helmets which completely covered their heads and necks. Shatterproof glass allowed them to see out. One man carried a pair of scissors, the other a screw driver and a pair of pliers.

"Okay, mister," one said in a muffled voice. "Better get outside."

"Glad to," Gannon said fervently. "Good luck."

Quite a crowd of neighbors had gathered out front by now. A couple of more police cars had arrived, and uniformed men were keeping the sidewalk out front clear by herding everyone to the opposite side of the street. Gannon spotted the plump figure of Edmund Holt standing next to his equally plump wife. Just in case the bomb experts made a mistake, an ambulance was standing by across the street.

As Gannon crossed the street, a burly figured moved from the crowd to meet him at the curb. "What's the story, Matt?" Lieutenant Harry Gloff asked.

"It came in the mail, Harry, addressed to Edmund Holt." He nodded toward the plump man. "That's Holt over there."

Gloff stared at the man for a moment, then turned back to Gannon. "Any idea who sent it?"

"Yes. An old fellow named Gerald Greene has a grudge against

Holt and his partner. The *Holt and Bancroft Manufacturing Company*." Taking the threatening note from his pocket, he showed it to the lieutenant.

Gloff frowned when he finished reading the note. "What's his grudge?"

Briefly Gannon explained the background situation. He had hardly finished when the two men of the bomb-disposal detail reappeared from the house. Both were carrying their helmets instead of wearing them. One held a piece of wrapping paper, the other the twin cylinders which comprised the bomb.

Going over to their truck, they set the paper and cylinders in the front seat, then went around back and placed their helmets in the rear of the truck. They began to strip off their asbestos suits.

Gloff and Gannon crossed the street to the truck.

The lieutenant showed his I.D. and asked, "What's the story?"

Both men completed folding their asbestos suits and stored them in the rear of the truck before answering. Then one said, "A spring job, Lieutenant. It had a spring-activated firing pin attached to the detonator. The way it was supposed to work, tearing the paper on the detonator end would release the spring, driving the firing pin into the detonator. Only it was a dud."

"A dud?" Gloff repeated.

"The spring wasn't set. It wouldn't have gone off even if she'd opened the right end. Here, I'll show you."

Opening the front door of the truck, he picked up the firing mechanism from the seat, where it lay separate from the twin cylinders. The device was a ten-gauge shotgun cartridge with slim but strong-looking steel springs attached to each side. The ends of the springs were connected to a thin steel plate with a pointed firing pin welded to its under side. At the moment the plate rested flat on the base of the shell, but slightly off center, so that the pin projected down alongside the shell.

Placing a finger over the shell's detonator cap so that it couldn't accidentally be fired, the bomb expert forced the small steel plate upward. A small metal bar no bigger around than the lead of a pencil was hinged to the under side of the plate. When it dropped to a vertical position, its free end resting on the base of the shell, the plate containing the firing pin was suspended above the detonator cap.

"Now it's armed," the bomb-disposal man said. "There was a wire attached to that small metal bar, with its other end taped to the inside of the wrapping. Tearing the paper would jerk the wire, then *Bam!* Except it wasn't cocked. The pin was in this position." Carefully he returned it to the position it had been in when he first showed it.

Gloff said, "Let's see that wrapping paper."

Reaching into the front seat again, the man handed it to him. It was ordinary brown paper which had been sealed with brown tape. An address sticker had Edmund Holt's name and address typed on it, but no return address. There was forty cents worth of canceled stamps and the postmark was local. Stamped in ink above the address label was: FIRST CLASS MAIL.

Gannon said, "He sent it first class so it wouldn't be opened for inspection."

The bomb expert took the paper back from Gloff's hands. "We have to turn this other stuff in to the crime lab, so we may as well save you the trouble and turn this in too."

Gannon suddenly had a thought which brought a startled expression to his face.

"Harry," he said urgently. "Another one of those things may have been delivered to Arthur Bancroft's home. We'd better get on the phone fast."

CHAPTER IV

Now that the bomb danger was over, the police had allowed the crowd of spectators to cross the street. Mr. and Mrs. Holt were standing near the bomb-disposal truck talking with neighbors.

Striding over to them, Gannon said to Holt, "What's your partner's

home phone number?"

The man looked surprised. "I don't know offhand. It's on a desk pad inside." Then a startled expression formed on his face. "You don't think—My God! Art went home sick this afternoon. If another of these things came in the mail—"

He broke off abruptly when Gannon took him by the elbow and started dogtrotting him toward the house. The burly form of Harry Gloff lumbered after them.

Inside Edmund Holt hurriedly leafed through a desk pad next to the phone. Locating the number he dialed it.

Standing next to him, Gannon could hear a female voice ask, "What number are you calling, please?"

Holt repeated the number he had dialed.

"Sorry, sir," the operator's voice said. "That number is temporarily out of order."

Slowly Holt dropped the phone back into its cradle. He stared at Gannon white-faced.

"I remember him mentioning once that his mail arrived about two in the afternoon," he said in a hushed voice.

Gannon glanced at his watch. It was just three. "What's his address?" he snapped.

"It's on Riverside Drive, only about a half block north of Fletcher. I'll have to look up the exact number."

"Never mind," Gannon said as

Holt reached for the desk pad. "We'll find it."

Slamming open the screen door, he headed for the street at a long-legged run. Harry Gloff tore after him, puffing to keep up. As Gannon jerked open the door of his car, Gloff jerked open the other door and tumbled in.

It was only about a five-minute drive to Arthur Bancroft's home if you observed traffic laws and drove at normal speed. Gannon made it in two minutes flat.

It wasn't hard to pick out his home, because the street in front of it was crammed with so many vehicles, they had to park a quarter block away. When they saw the conglomeration, both men slowly got from the car, knowing there was no longer any need to hurry. Clustered in front of the house was a fire truck, an emergency rescue vehicle, an ambulance and two police radio cars.

The home was about the size of Edmund Holt's, with a large wooden veranda. The veranda was littered with broken glass from a burst picture window, the front door had been blown from its hinges and lay on the porch, and there was a ragged, window-sized hole in the wall between the door and the picture window.

Police were holding back curious onlookers, but a cluster of people stood on the lawn within the circle. Gannon recognized Arthur Bancroft, a homicide cop named

Sergeant Lennox and a police lab technician named Sam Mosby. The others in the group all wore firemen's helmets.

"Wonder how the devil he escaped the blast?" Gannon muttered to Gloff as they worked their way through the crowd.

"Who?" the lieutenant asked.

"Arthur Bancroft. He's standing there all in one piece."

A uniformed policeman, recognizing Gloff, opened an aisle through the bystanders to let him and Gannon through. They joined the group on the lawn.

Sergeant Lennox nodded to Gannon and said to Lieutenant Gloff, "A bombing, Harry. Shortly after two, but we didn't get the call until twenty minutes ago. The husband was in too much of a state of shock to think about the police, I guess. He was still trying to raise the operator on a phone whose box was blown from the wall when we got here. Said he was trying to call a doctor. Some neighbor finally called the fire department, though nothing was on fire. They called us after they got here."

Arthur Bancroft's face was no longer granite-hard. He merely looked sick. In a dull voice he said to Gannon, "I killed her. I should have opened it myself. It was meant for me."

Gloff looked inquiringly at Lennox. "What's he talking about?"

"His wife," Lennox said. "The bomb came in the mail, addressed

to him. Only she opened it."

"I told her to," Bancroft said in the same dull voice. "She said, 'A package came for you, dear,' and I said, 'Well, open it and see what it is.' She never would have otherwise. She never opened my mail without permission."

Gloff asked, "How'd you escape the blast?"

"I was outside," Bancroft said shakily. "I came home from the office with a headache. On the way I stopped at a drug store for some aspirin, but I left the bottle in the car. The mailman came just as I walked in the back door. Emma brought in the mail and told me about the package. Just then I remembered the aspirin. I told her to open the package and went back outside to get the bottle. I was in the garage when the thing went off."

Lieutenant Gloff said, "Let's take a look," and headed for the veranda.

Gannon and Lennox followed the lieutenant inside. The front doorway led directly into the front room.

It was a gruesome sight. The body, lying in one corner, was so mutilated, the only indication of sex was a high-heeled pump on one foot. The other pump lay in an opposite corner. The room was a shambles of broken furniture and the walls were spattered with blood.

A few scraps of brown wrap-

ping paper near a shattered end table indicated where the woman had opened the package. A phone was still balanced precariously on the remains of the table, but the phone box had been blown from the wall.

Lennox said, "Sam has already taken pictures. As soon as he collects all the bomb fragments he can find, I'll let them take away the body."

Making a grimace, Gloff turned and walked out again. The others followed.

Harry Gloff said to Sergeant Lennox, "We already know who sent the bomb. We just came from another house that got one, only it was a dud. Put out a pickup on Gerald Greene." He turned to Gannon. "What's that address, Matt?"

Gannon gave Lennox the Ashbury Street address. "He lives with a niece named Mrs. Mona Jarvis. But I don't think you'll find him there. He's been missing since Saturday."

Lennox jotted down the address and asked, "What's the guy look like?"

Gannon gave him the description.

There was nothing further either Gloff or Gannon could accomplish at the scene. After pausing for a moment to drop a word of sympathy to Arthur Bancroft, Gannon drove the lieutenant back to the Holt residence, where his car was parked.

After dropping off Harry Gloff, Gannon drove back downtown to the main office of the Yellow Cab Company on West Third. He asked to speak to whoever was in charge of dispatch records and was referred to a genial gray-haired man named Elmer Hewitt.

After explaining who he was and that he was working with the police on a murder case, Gannon said, "Around noon Saturday one of your cabs picked up a fare in the twenty-nine-hundred block of Ashbury Street." Taking out his notebook, he read off the exact number. "Will you look up the dispatch record on it?"

"Sure," Hewitt said.

Opening a file drawer, the man leafed through dispatch slips for a few moments, finally pulled one out. "One passenger to the Coastline Bus Depot."

Gannon was pleased. The Coastline was a small, independent bus company which ran lines only to communities within about a fifty-mile radius of Los Angeles. There was a much better chance of a ticket seller remembering an individual customer there than there would be at a large station such as Greyhound.

Thanking Elmer Hewitt, Gannon left and drove to the Coastline Bus Depot.

There was only one ticket cage in the tiny depot. A young, brown-haired woman with a cutely turned-up nose was on duty in it.

When Gannon showed her his license, she looked him over with interest.

"My," she said. "I've never known a private detective before."

He grinned at her. "I've never known a Coastline ticket seller before."

She emitted a small laugh which just escaped being a giggle. "What can I do for you, Mr. Gannon?"

"Were you on duty at noon last Saturday?"

The girl nodded. "I come on just at noon."

"Do you recall selling a ticket to a man about sixty-seven years old? Five feet eleven, a hundred and twenty-five pounds, thin and slightly stooped. Full head of white hair, blue eyes and thick-lensed glasses."

An indignant expression grew on her face. "Do I! The old lecher asked for my telephone number!"

"That's the one," Gannon said with a wry smile. "Where'd he buy a ticket to?"

She thought for a moment. "Ventura. I'm sure of that because he took the one o'clock bus, and that's the only one that leaves at that time." She smiled a little ruefully, "It's always either old men or young smart alecs who want my telephone number. Never anybody interesting." She gave him an encouraging smile.

"That's life," Gannon said with amused sympathy. "Who's the driver on that run?"

She made a small face at him for

ignoring the hint, then shrugged philosophically. "Harold Rourke. This week he's on a different schedule. He should be in a little before four thirty." She glanced at a wall clock, which said five after four. "He might be in the coffee shop right now. A big fellow with red hair."

"Thanks," Gannon said, and headed for the coffee shop.

Only one man in bus driver's uniform was in the shop. He sat at the counter alone with a cup of coffee before him, a big man with red hair and a square Irish face. Gannon slipped onto the stool next to him.

"You Harold Rourke?" he inquired.

The man swung sidewise to examine him. "Uh-huh."

"My name is Matt Gannon. I'm a private detective." He exhibited his license.

"Well, well," the bus driver said with interest. "A private eye. I thought they were only on television. What's on your mind?"

A waitress interrupted to ask what Gannon wanted. He ordered a cup of coffee.

When the girl moved away, Gannon said, "Last Saturday you had an old man on the one P.M. run to Ventura." He repeated the description he had given the ticket girl. "Remember him?"

"I'll say I do," Rourke said grimly. "I had to move the old fool. The woman he sat next to came for-

ward and complained that he kept pressing his knee against hers. I made him come up front where I could watch him. Hope he isn't a friend of yours."

"I've never met him," Gannon said. "But I'm kind of looking forward to it. Did he mention anything about what he planned to do in Ventura?"

The waitress brought Gannon's coffee and the bus driver waited until she moved away again. Then he said, "The only conversation I had with him was when I made him move. But I think he must have been visiting a daughter. The babe who met him at the bus couldn't have been a girl friend. She was too much of a doll to bother with such an old guy unless he was her father."

"What did she look like?" Gannon asked with interest.

"A platinum blonde in her late twenties or early thirties. It was hard to tell her age with all the gook she had on her face. She was a real doll except for that. It made her look like a burlesque queen. As a matter of fact, I figured that's what she probably was. A stripper."

"Well, well," Gannon said softly. "You've really been a help. Can I buy you a second cup of coffee?"

"I have to check in at the office. I drive out in fifteen minutes. Thanks anyway."

"Thank you," Gannon said. "You don't know how much of a help you've been."

CHAPTER V

It was sixty-five miles to Ventura, but it was freeway all the way. Gannon left the Coastline Bus Depot at a quarter after four and, by holding the speedometer needle at ninety all the time he was on the freeway, managed to make the Ventura City Hall at a quarter after five, fifteen minutes before it closed.

In the city clerk's office he asked a female worker if they maintained an alphabetical list of property owners.

"Our records are by plat number," she said. "But the tax roll is alphabetical. Try the tax assessor's office."

A middle-aged female clerk in the tax assessor's office was just getting ready to close up. Giving her his most charming smile, Gannon introduced himself and asked if there was any beach property listed in the name of Alice Emory. She graciously consented to look.

After checking the tax roll, the women shook her head. "Sorry, Mr. Gannon."

The answer was a disappointment. According to Mona Jarvis, her Uncle Gerald had been going to the "fishing lodge" of a friend over the weekend. Since he had subsequently been met at the Ventura bus depot by a woman answering Alice Emory's description, it was logical to assume she had taken him to some kind of beach cottage or cabin. He had been sure some sort

of beach property would be listed in her name.

Then he had another idea. "How about either Edmund Holt or Arthur Bancroft?"

She checked again, regretfully shook her head a second time.

"Well, thanks anyway," Gannon said disappointedly, and was turning away when the woman said, "There's something listed under the *Holt and Bancroft Manufacturing Company*."

Gannon swung back to the counter. "What is it?"

"There's no indication on the tax roll as to what the property consists of, but from the address and assessed valuation, I'd guess it was a beach cottage."

"That's what I want," he said with satisfaction. "It should have occurred to me that it might be company owned. It's an old tax dodge to charge vacation homes as a business expense. What's the address?"

The clerk wrote it on a piece of paper and handed it to him.

"Thanks," Gannon said with a smile. "Sorry I kept you overtime."

"Anytime at all," she said with sincerity. "I enjoyed being able to help."

The cottage was at the far edge of town at a point where the beach was a mixture of shale and gravel instead of sand. Because of the poor frontage it was relatively isolated, few people apparently having cared to locate cottages there. To the right

the nearest cottage was a good hundred yards away. In the other direction a stand of palm trees and weed-grown undergrowth hid whatever was beyond.

The cottage was a small, one-story frame building built like a box. It was locked up tight and no one answered to his knock. Peering through a front window, Gannon saw a simply-furnished front room with open doors off it leading to a kitchen and a bedroom. An unmade double bed he could see through the open bedroom door suggested that the place had recently been in use.

Tire marks alongside the cottage were relatively recent, since it had rained the previous Friday. They had to have been made not earlier than Saturday.

Gannon was certain this was the "fishing lodge" to which Gerald Greene had been taken by his "friend." The next question was what had happened to him after he got there?

He circled the cabin, scanning the ground in all directions, but could detect nothing to indicate freshly-disturbed ground. His gaze touched the cement top of a cistern behind the building and he moved over to examine it.

The cistern was topped by an iron manhole cover. Prying it off, Gannon peered downward. Six feet below he caught the smooth reflection of water.

That would be silly, he thought.

Even murderers aren't likely to pollute their water supply. And the water in it suggested that the cistern was in use. He let the cover bang back in place.

Circling the building again, he tried its various windows and was gratified to find a bedroom window unlocked. Pushing it up, he climbed inside.

A quick search of the place disclosed nothing of interest. There were no personal papers of any kind; not even a single letter. There was some fishing equipment in one of the closets, including a hefty tackle box. A bottle of reel oil in the latter had leaked all over the lures, and in examining its contents, Gannon got oil on his hands.

There was a small bathroom off the bedroom, and he entered it to wash up. It contained a small shower, he noted, and there was an electric water heater, but it wasn't turned on. He had to content himself with a cold-water wash.

Outside again he made another circuit of the cottage, then gave up. He drove back to Los Angeles.

Periodically, up till ten P.M., he called Alice Emory's phone number, but there was no answer. Eventually he tabled the matter until the next morning.

In the morning he was shaving when an idea occurred to him. Starting at the hot water flowing from the open water spigot, he thought of when he had washed his hands at the cottage bathroom. There had

been no sound of an electric pump turning on, even though he had run water for some time. And with a cistern you can't run water through pipes without a pump to build pressure.

City water must have been piped into the area since the cistern was dug, he thought. Which meant the cistern wasn't used any more.

Quickly he finished shaving, dressed and phoned his answering service that he wouldn't be reachable all morning. Then he rolled a pair of swimming trunks in a towel and left the apartment. A block away he stopped at the filling station where he habitually traded and borrowed a heavy tow rope.

A little over an hour later he was again at the cottage owned by the *Holt and Bancroft Manufacturing Company*.

Glancing around to make sure no one was in sight, Gannon re-entered the cottage by the same route he had used the day before. In the bedroom he stripped and donned the swim trunks. Outside again he pried up the manhole cover over the cistern.

Lifting the tow rope from the car trunk, he looked around for something near the cistern to tie it to. When he failed to spot anything, he climbed in the car and backed it close to the cistern. He tied one end of the rope to the rear bumper, dropped the other end down the manhole. Grasping the rope, he lowered himself into the hole.

The water was nearly chin deep. Groping outward with one foot, he immediately located a bulky object which gave slightly to pressure. Submerging, he examined it with his hands. It felt like what he had expected to find: a human body.

The corpse was weighted down by an iron bar across its chest and another across the ankles. When he heaved the bars aside, the body slowly began to rise to the surface.

Getting his head above water, Gannon looped the rope around the corpse's chest, then pulled himself out of the hole. He hauled up the body, untied the rope and returned it to his car trunk. Barely glancing at the corpse, he re-entered the cottage by the bedroom window, took a cold shower, towed himself down and dressed.

It was the idea of immersion in the same water where a corpse had lain for several days which brought about the shower, not fear of contamination. For there had been no odor of decay in the cistern. Although he didn't have a squeamish stomach, the very thought of the thing made him want to scrub himself thoroughly and instantly.

Outside again he tossed his trunks and towel into the back seat, then went over to examine the body. It was very little bloated, considering that it must have been in the cistern between forty-eight and seventy-two hours. The clear rain water in the cistern seemed to have preserved the body.

There was no doubt that the dead man was Gerald Greene, for the description tallied perfectly except that there were no glasses. Probably they were still at the bottom of the cistern, Gannon thought, but he had no desire to search for them.

Kneeling, he studied the corpse more closely. There was no sign of a wound or of strangulation. Greene had every appearance of having drowned. Gannon wondered if the eventual plan had been to throw the body into the Pacific and, if it was ever found, let the police assume it had either been suicide or an accidental drowning.

Rising, he stared down at the dead man moodily for a few moments more, then climbed in his car and drove away. A quarter mile from the cottage he stopped at a filling station and used the phone to call the Ventura police station.

A nasal voice said, "Police headquarters, Stone speaking."

Gannon said, "My name is Matt Gannon. I'm a private detective from Los Angeles. I just pulled a dead man from a cistern at a beach cottage." Tersely he described the location of the cottage.

"I'll send somebody right over," the desk man said. "Stand by there."

"I can give you everything I know over the phone," Gannon said. "Better take this down. Ready?"

"Go ahead."

"The victim's name is Gerald Greene, age sixty-seven, local ad-

dress care of Mrs. Mona Jarvis in the twenty-nine hundred block of Ashbury Street, Los Angeles. Mrs. Jarvis is a niece. He's currently wanted for a murder he didn't commit in Los Angeles. I'm heading back there now to clear both murderers up. I'll contact you again as soon as I have all the answers. Meantime if you have any questions about Greene, you can check with Lieutenant Harry Gloff at the Los Angeles homicide division."

"Wait a minute" Stone protested "You can't report a dead man, then just walk off."

"I'll be available any time you want me," Gannon said. He reeled off the address and phone number of his Figueroa Street office. "Right now I have more important things to do than stand around repeating what I just told you."

He hung up.

CHAPTER VI

Dropping more coins in the phone slot, Gannon made a long-distance call to Los Angeles police headquarters and asked for Homicide.

When he got Lieutenant Gloff on the phone, he said, "This is Matt Gannon, Harry. I'm phoning from Ventura. I just found Gerald Greene in a cistern at a beach cottage owned by the *Holt and Bancroft Manufacturing Company*."

After a moment of surprised silence, Gloff said, "Dead?"

"No," Gannon growled. "He was hiding from the police under five feet of water."

"Very funny," the lieutenant growled back. "You didn't say there was water in the cistern. What was it? Suicide?"

"He looks drowned. But a cistern seems an odd place to drown yourself. Besides, he was weighted down and the lid was on the cistern. I don't think he could have managed it without help."

Gloff was silent again, apparently thinking. Presently he said, "You say this was on some property owned by *Holt and Bancroft*?"

"Uh-huh. A beach cottage."

In a slow voice the lieutenant said, "In a way I've been expecting something like this, Matt. Ever since I read the lab report on the second bomb this morning."

"Oh?"

"They managed to rebuild it in the lab. How, when it was practically granulated, I don't know. But they pull some amazing stuff. It was a little different than the one Holt got. It had detonating devices on *both* ends, so it would blow no matter which end of the package was opened."

"That's interesting," Gannon said.

"Yeah, I got to thinking about the bomb Holt received not being armed, and I wondered if maybe it was meant not to go off. Maybe it was a red herring."

"I've been thinking that since last

night," Gannon told him. "Ever since I learned who Greene went to visit Saturday."

"Who? We talked to Mona Jarvis and she said he was weekending at the fishing lodge of some friend. Only she didn't know what friend."

"Alice Emory met him at the Ventura bus depot."

"Alice Emory?" Gloff repeated in a puzzled tone.

"*Holt and Bancroft's* receptionist. I forgot you haven't met her."

The lieutenant sounded even more puzzled. "You think she rigged this whole thing?"

"I think she helped, Harry. Suppose you meet me at *Holt and Bancroft* in about an hour and a half. I don't suppose Arthur Bancroft showed up at his office today because of his wife's death, but we ought to have both partners there. Can you pick Bancroft up?"

"Sure. But who'd this Emory woman help? Holt?"

"It has to be one of the partners, Harry. Which, I'm not sure. She didn't seem very friendly with Holt, but that may have been a cover-up to conceal their connection. We'll decide when we get her together with both partners."

"All right," Gloff said. "See you in an hour and a half."

As Gannon pulled away from the filling station, he heard a siren in the distance. As it drew nearer, he realized it was coming straight toward him.

Ventura police en route to the

cottage, he decided. He turned off on a side street and detoured around the approaching police car.

When he arrived at the *Holt and Bancroft Manufacturing Company* right on schedule, he spotted Harry Gloff's car already parked in front. The lieutenant had just arrived too, for he was getting out one side of the car and Arthur Bancroft was getting out the other side. Crossing the street, Gannon joined the pair.

"Hello, Gannon," Bancroft said with a jerky nod. "The lieutenant hasn't explained what this is all about. Do you know?"

"No more than he does," Gannon said. "You'll hear about it inside."

In the outer office the blonde receptionist was seated behind the low counter. She looked surprised to see Arthur Bancroft and a trifle wary at sight of Gannon. Gloff she examined without recognition.

After introducing her to the lieutenant, Gannon asked, "Mr. Holt in?"

"Yes, sir. I'll ring him."

"Don't bother," Lieutenant Gloff said ponderously. "We'll just go on in. You come along too, miss."

"Me?" she inquired, raising her plucked brows.

"You," Gloff confirmed.

Looking a bit upset, she rose and came from behind the counter. Leading the way over to Edmund Holt's office, she knocked on the door.

"Yes?" Holt's voice inquired.

Opening the door, she said, "Mr. Gannon and a police lieutenant are here with Mr. Bancroft, sir."

"Come in, gentlemen," Holt said, rising from behind his desk.

They all filed into the room, Gannon last. He closed the door behind him. Holt glanced at Alice Emory in mild surprise that she was remaining.

"The lieutenant said he wanted me here too," the blonde said in a steady voice.

Shrugging, Holt resumed his seat and waved the others to chairs. Alice and Bancroft took seats, but Gannon and Gloff remained standing.

Gloff said, "I've called you all together to discuss a murder. Or, rather, a couple of murders. We've just discovered the body of Gerald Greene."

The blonde receptionist emitted a little gasp. Arthur Bancroft's stony face registered surprise. Edmund Holt looked startled.

Gloff said, "Matt, tell them where you found Greene's body."

Gannon looked the group over. In a quiet voice he said, "In a cistern behind a cottage up in Ventura. The cottage is listed on the tax roll as belonging to this company."

Both partners stared at Gannon. "Our company cottage?" Holt said in a high voice.

Bancroft asked, "How the devil did he get there?"

"He was lured there," Gannon said. "He thought he was going to

spend an exciting weekend with a woman."

"What woman?" Holt demanded.

"Your receptionist, Alice Emory."

The partners turned their gazes on the blonde, who suddenly looked as though she were going to faint.

Gannon said, "It wasn't Monday morning that Gerald Greene showed up at this office. It couldn't have been, because he was dead by then. He came here days earlier. As a guess, I'd say about last Friday."

Edmund Holt asked puzzledly, "What are you talking about?"

"Greene didn't bring in that threatening note," Gannon explained. "He came in to make one more stab at getting some money for his invention. Alice let him in to see one of you partners. Which one, we'll get to in a minute."

"I certainly didn't see him," Holt said.

"Nor I," Bancroft chimed right behind him.

"One of you did," Gannon assured them. "And you were surprised to see the change in him since his last appearance a couple of years back. He had become a senile old man. He didn't do any threatening. He was just after a handout. I doubt that you would have given it to him, except that something happened."

"What?" Holt wanted to know. "I suspect you saw him make

some kind of pass at Alice, and this gave you an idea. You called Alice aside and instructed her to play up to the old man and invite him to spend a weekend at her 'fishing lodge.' Then, in order to put him in a holiday mood, you gave him a couple of hundred bucks. I'm not certain of the order of events, but something like that must have happened. I imagine that after his session with you he lingered in the outer office to ogle Alice, and that's when she made her pitch. He was a pushover, of course. It was all in his head, but he was willing to chase anything in skirts at any time of the day or night."

Alice said faintly, "It isn't true. I didn't—"

"You met him at the Ventura bus depot on Saturday afternoon," Gannon interrupted harshly. "We've established that by a witness. You took him to the beach cottage. There you either murdered him yourself, or helped."

"No," she said in a whisper. "I just delivered him and left. I didn't know—"

Abruptly she halted and stared at Gannon, appalled at her admission.

Gannon said, "The threatening note was probably typed right here in this office. The police will be able to establish that. Alice was instructed to say the old man delivered it personally. That set the scene. Over the weekend, while the shop was closed, the bombs must have been constructed here. There are tools

enough in the place to build an arsenal. Monday evening they were dropped in the mail in order to assure delivery Tuesday."

Gannon paused and Gloff cleared his throat to get attention. "All right," he said. "Which one of you did it?"

"I certainly didn't," Arthur Bancroft said indignantly. "Why would I send a bomb to myself?"

"Why would I either?" his plump partner echoed.

The lieutenant gave the latter a wolfish smile. "As a red herring, Mr. Holt. Yours was a dud."

Holt's mouth dropped open. Bancroft scowled at him.

Gannon slowly shook his head. "You're assuming that the bomb mailed to Bancroft accidentally killed the wrong person, Harry. My guess is that it was meant for Mrs. Bancroft. Holt's bomb was a dud simply because Bancroft had no reason to kill his partner, but it would have looked suspicious for only one partner to receive a bomb."

Everyone looked at him.

"Bancroft arranged it beautifully to look like an accident," Gannon went on. "He came home with a headache, stopping en route for aspirin and timing his arrival home just as the mailman got there. Probably he parked up the street until

he saw the mailman coming. He deliberately left the aspirin in the car, so he'd have an excuse to be out of the house when the bomb blew. He had to be home when it arrived in order to instruct his wife to open the package. Because, as he himself told us, she never touched his mail without permission."

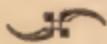
Gannon looked at Alice Emory. "You may as well point your finger, Alice. You're hooked as an accessory no matter which is guilty. Am I right?"

The woman started to cry. Between muffled sobs she whispered, "I didn't know he was going to kill the old man. I thought I was just going to be his wife. He promised to marry me if I'd help him."

Edmund Holt stared at his partner in horror. Arthur Bancroft sat perfectly still, his stony face expressionless. But his eyes refused to look back at his partner.

After the cuffs were on, Harry Gloff said to Gannon, "How'd you figure it was Bancroft, Matt? I was guessing that Holt wanted to get rid of his partner."

"Simple," Gannon said with a grin. "Holt engaged me to investigate the threat. Bancroft wanted to ignore it. I didn't think a killer would be simple-minded enough to hire me to catch him."



MANHUNT'S Gun Rack



Smith & Wesson
.44 Magnum

The SMITH & WESSON .44 MAGNUM is a big solid handful of dynamite. Chambered for the ultra-powerful, long-ranging .44 Magnum cartridge, this revolver is for the wide open spaces. It is shown here with oversize target stocks and a micrometer click sight, adjustable for windage and elevation.

a SWEET deal

She was just too good to be true. Eddie knew that somewhere under those soft lush curves there was a real sharp angle.

BY JACK LEMMON

I CASHED my paycheck in the currency exchange, just like I've done every Friday night for the last three and a half years. Betty and I have kind of an understanding about that. On paydays I cash the check, and spend four or five bucks for a sandwich and a few beers after work. Betty says anyone works as hard as I do all week is entitled to a couple of beers once in a while.

This particular Friday, I'm feeling a little flusher than usual. I had won the baseball pool at work, and I got six extra bucks Betty doesn't even know about. I'm thinking that for once in my life I'm not going to Cassey's, and drink beer with those neighborhood bums. Not tonight. I'm going somewhere that's got class, and where I can feel like I'm really somebody.

I go over to the Sherman which

is a hotel of the better kind. No broads working the lobby, or any of that kind of monkey business. A doorman in a uniform holds the door for me, and I'm really living. I stop in the can, and put on my tie. I'd worn a white shirt to work, but I didn't want the boys to see me leaving with a tie. I give myself the old once over in the mirror, and I must admit I look pretty good. Pretty good, that is, for a \$74.50 a week shipping clerk. A colored boy in a white jacket dusts me off with a whisk broom. I flip him a dime, and walk out feeling eight foot tall.

I see a sign that says, "Cocktail Lounge", and I figure that's where I'll start. I can feel the class. This joint has what you'd call subdued lighting. It's so damn dark you could hardly tell a one from a five, which, I figure, is why they keep it

that way. There's about a three inch thick carpet on the floor, and over in the corner an interesting red head is quietly playing a piano.

I hop up on a well upholstered stool at the bar, and ask the uniformed bartender for a glass of beer. In a kind of snotty way he says they don't have any draft beer, only bottles. I say it's OK, bring me a bottle. He sets it up, takes my buck, and brings back 40¢ change with a cash register receipt. I'm thinking, class or no class, 60¢ is a lot for a bottle of beer that sells for a quarter at Cassey's.

I had just about decided to drink my beer, and get the hell out of there, back with my kind of people. I'm looking in the blue mirror that's behind the bar, and I see the reflection of a broad climbing on the stool next to me. It's so damn dark, and what with the blue mirror, I can't get a good look at her, so I turn my head. As I look at her, I realize that she's been looking at me all the time. I feel kind of funny, but a big smile crosses her face, and I figure it's OK. About this time the bartender comes over, and she turns to give him her order. This gives me a chance to take in the rest of her. When I say, take in, I mean just that.

This is a real doll. *She makes Zsa Zsa Gabor look like Harry Truman.* This is a built like you never see outside one of those girlie magazines. She's got on a dress that's cut just low enough across the

chest to see that there's nothing phoney there. Plenty of cleavage, and enough roundness showing so you can tell the rest is all her. I glance at the legs, and think I'd better look elsewhere before I fall off the stool. I'm just wondering if I could clasp my hands around the tiny waist, when I realize she's looking at me again. This fantastic built is topped with a head and face that makes you forget your own name. Black, glistening hair, and a face that stops your breathing for a minute. The full lips are slightly parted in kind of a quizzical smile at me, so I figure, what the hell, and say, "Hi".

Now don't get me wrong, I'm not stupid enough to think I can get anywhere with this broad. I know what I am, and I think I know what she is. She's either some money guy's sugar babe, or one of those \$200.00 a night broads you read about; and worth every penny, I'm thinking. I know I can't afford this kind of stuff, but it doesn't hurt to be friendly, particularly in this case.

The smile broadens, and in a deep throaty whisper she says, "Hi, How you doin' tonight?".

Her voice makes me squirm on my seat a little, but I give her my best smile, and we make a little small talk. You know, about the weather, and stuff like that.

Pretty soon she says, "I haven't seen you around before. You come in often?"

I explain about working for the wholesale house a couple of blocks away, and tell her I just stopped in on my way home. I don't tell her about being a shipping clerk. I figure, why not have some fun before she finds out I got no dough.

We keep on talking, and she tells me her name is Doris, and she lives in the hotel because she doesn't like to be bothered with cooking meals, and doing housework. She also lets it drop that she lives alone, and isn't married.

By this time I've bought two rounds, and she's insisted on buying a couple. We're both beginning to feel pretty good.

I tell her about my wife, Betty, and how our kid, Betsy, is already talking so good for being only eighteen months old. I even show her a picture I carry in my wallet.

I've spent about five bucks already, and I figure it's about time I got out of there before I really get loaded, and blow the whole paycheck.

I tell her I think I'd better get going. She looks at a tiny wrist watch she's wearing, and says that she thinks she ought to get going too.

We pull up stakes, and I follow her to the door trying to get a look at that built from the back. What a look! She walks like she's got a limp in both legs. There seems to be a hell of a lot more movement than is necessary just to move that body through a saloon.

When we get out into the lobby she asks me if I'm going right home, or what. I tell her that I thought I'd stop for a sandwich first, and then make it for home.

She asks, why don't I come up to her room where she can fix a sandwich first, and we'll have a nightcap.

Well, this is it. I level with her, and tell her about just being a shipping clerk, and how I don't have any dough to spend.

She gets a real hurt look on her face, and says, who said anything about money. She was just trying to be friendly.

I figure, what the hell have I got to lose? Now I've been around a little, and I know when a broad asks a guy into her room after an evening of drinking, there's usually more to it than just being neighborly. I wonder why a broad with this kind of class should fool around with a guy like me. I'm 32 years old, and far from handsome. I've never been much of a ladies' man, either. Don't get me wrong, like I said, I've been around some. Down at work I had a couple of tumbles with a sharp little blonde from the billing department, but there was nothing serious. You know, just for kicks. I'm not so dumb that I think I look like anything I'm not either. I know that I probably look just like what I am. A dressed up shipping clerk out for the evening.

She keeps telling me she's only trying to be friendly. I say, "OK."

She grabs my arm, and steers me across the lobby. Every guy in the joint is staring. I guess they wonder how a jerk like me rates with a broad like her.

We get into the elevator, and she says, "Third floor, please". The elevator boy's eyes are damn near popping out of his head as he looks at her, but he gets us to the third floor. We walk down the hall, and she stops us at room 267. She hands me a key, and says, "You open it, honey". I'm so damn nervous, I can hardly get the key in the lock. Finally I get the door open, and she goes in first, and switches on a light.

It's a real plush layout. One of those two room suites. A big living room, and a smaller room that I can see has a bed in it. She goes over, opens up one of those portable bars, and says, "Why don't you fix us a drink while I slip into something comfortable?"

Well, I figure, she'll come out in something sexy, and put the deal to me. I'm thinking, what the hell, it's worth it to stick around, just to see her in something sexy.

As she disappears into the bedroom, I ask her what she wants to drink. As she closes the door, she smiles, "A Scotch on the rocks for me".

I go to the portable bar, find a bowl of ice cubes, and fix her a drink. I ignore the little glasses, and fix it in a highball glass. I'm probably kidding myself, but I think maybe I can get her loaded,

and make out. I fix myself a weak scotch and water.

As I'm finishing with the drinks I hear the bedroom door open, and turn to see her. The drinks damn near fall out of my hand. She's got on some kind of a black lace thing that hides about as much as a plate glass window. On top of that, there's a bright light on in the bedroom behind her which shines right through what the black thing tries to hide. As she walks towards me, I see that there's a slit up the front of the black lace thing which allows a well curved ivory thigh to peek out with each step.

By the time she gets across the room to me, I'm shaking like a leaf. She takes her drink from me, and says, "Why don't you sit down, and make yourself comfortable?". I can't say a word, but I'm thinking there's only one way to make me comfortable, and it isn't by sitting.

I collapse onto a couch, and fumble for a cigarette. I offer her one, and she comes over and takes it. I light a match, and she bends forward to get a light. As she does so, I can see that my guess about nothing being phoney with that chest was right.

About this time I figure, what the hell. If she want's the whole damn pay check, all she's got to do is ask for it. Without straightening up, she takes the cigarette from her mouth, leans a little further forward, and says, "Why so nervous? I just want to be friendly."

That does it as far as I'm concerned. I lean forward a little, and our lips meet. After the kind of kiss that Betty hasn't given me for three years, she says, "Wait a minute, let me get rid of this cigarette." She dumps it in the ash tray with mine, and comes to me.

An hour later, I finally get back enough strength to get dressed. As I'm dressing, she's lying on the couch watching me, and I'm damn near ready to start all over again. She says, "I hope this isn't good bye. I'd sure like to see more of you."

I explain to her again that I'm married, have a kid, and that I don't want to get too involved with anyone.

She says, "Who's asking you to get involved? I just thought you might want to get together again some time."

I tell her, "Sure, sure, but I don't have a hell of a lot of free time."

We talk a little more about it, and she suggests that maybe since I work so close, I could come up during my lunch hour, or after work once in a while.

I tell her OK, I'll try and make it up on Monday during my lunch hour. She gives me a kiss that makes me want to stay a little longer, but it's late, and I leave.

Waiting for the elevator, I wonder about her. I can't figure this broad out. There's got to be an angle somewhere. Finally I figure she's probably just a nympho out

for kicks, and if that's the way she want's it, I'll supply the kicks.

Monday I run over to the hotel during lunch, and wonder if I'll find things different. I call her room on the house phone, and that silky voice tells me to come right up. Everything's just as it was the other night, except she's got on a different black lace thing. She's still "just trying to be friendly," and I get back to work about fifteen minutes late. Without lunch too.

I catch a couple of more matinees, and see her after work on Friday that week. I still can't figure the angle, but I don't even care. This is too good a thing to risk losing by figuring an angle.

Monday I catch her after work for a quickie, and Tuesday I don't eat lunch. Tuesday afternoon my boss comes over, and says, "There's a telephone call for you, Eddie."

The idea of a call kind of scares me. I wonder if something's happened to Betsy, or there's some kind of trouble at home. I pick up the phone and say, "Hello".

A hard sounding guy says, "Eddie, this is a friend of Doris'. I gotta see you about something."

I ask him what he's got to see me about, but he won't say. Just says that he's got to see me, and it's pretty important. He says I'd better make it up to Doris' room after work, and have a little talk. He says to be sure and come, but not to worry, nobody's going to hurt me.

At least not yet. Then he hangs up.

Right off the bat, I figure I wouldn't go. Why should I? Then I get to thinking, and wonder if I don't go if this guy won't make trouble between me and Betty. I got enough troubles without Betty's finding out about Doris. Then too, I think this guy is probably Doris' boy friend, maybe even her husband, and he knows she's a nympho, and won't blame me too much.

Doris lets me in, and for the first time since I've met her, I see her in something besides one of those transparent lace things. I also see that there's two guys in the room. The one is a little dark guy with a pimply, oily face. He's sitting on the couch that I'm so familiar with. The other is a big, heavy, tough looking guy. He's standing against the wall opposite the door.

Doris says, "Eddie, this is Bennie; he's the one who called you." She indicates the little oily guy on the couch.

He says, "Sit down, Eddie, let's talk."

I figure it might be just as well to sit, and listen for a little. Particularly with that brute against the wall looking like he was.

Bennie gives me the pitch. He says that Doris doesn't just live off the fat of the land. He says she's a working girl. Seems she's sort of a bookkeeper for what Bennie calls the "Outfit." He goes on to say that

the outfit discovered there was a shortage of around three grand in Doris' accounts. He says that the outfit doesn't much care for this kind of thing, and so they put the heat on Doris. Doris held out for a little while, but finally admitted that she took the three grand, and that she gave it to her boy friend. She names me as her boy friend.

Bennie says, "Look, Eddie, the boss wants we should get his three grand back."

I look at Doris and say, "Look baby, I don't know what you're trying to prove, but it ain't going to work. I never got a dime from you, and you know it. Besides that I got no dough to get you out of hock."

With those great big brown eyes that would lay any man out, she innocently says, "Come on, Eddie, give 'em back their three grand, and let's you and me have fun."

I try and tell Bennie that she's making me for a fall guy. I tell him I never saw three grand in my life, and Doris isn't my girl friend.

Bennie says, "Cut the crap. We checked with the bell hops, and found out you're damn near living here. Take a little advice. Get the three grand, and get it fast. I'll give you a couple of days."

I tell him I got no three grand, and no way to get three grand.

He says, "Look, I don't care where or how you get it, just get it." With his shoulder he points to the big brute, and says, "Herman's already getting nervous."

Herman is lounging against the wall picking his fingernails with a six inch switch blade.

I figure this is no place for me with my tender juggler vein, I tell Bennie I'll think it over, and ask him where I can get in touch with him.

Bennie says never mind trying to get in touch with him, he'll be in touch with me. This I figure, is probably true.

I'm not surprised to find my hand shaking as I reach for the elevator button. I'm surprised I can make the hand work at all.

I go through the lobby of that hotel like you know what through a tin horn, and head for the nearest bar. I toss down a couple of doubles real fast, and call Betty. I need time to think so I tell her I'll be a little late, I've got to put in some overtime. Betty says that's fine, we can use the extra dough, and she'll have something for me to eat when I get home.

I sit sipping a drink, and trying to make some sense out of what happened. First off, I know I've been played for a fall guy, but good. I walked right into it. If I'd had any sense, I could have seen it coming, but I hadn't, and there was no use thinking about that part of it.

The important thing was what to do now. I didn't want Betty to find out about Doris. Like most women, Betty was a little touchy

about other broads. What the hell, I couldn't blame her. If it had been the other way around, I'd blow my stack.

Then there was the matter of the three grand. I couldn't beg, borrow or steal three grand if my life depended on it, and it probably did. Betty and I had about two hundred bucks in a joint checking account, but that was a long way from three grand. Then too, I'd have to explain what happened to the money. I thought about stealing the dough, but gave that up too. I didn't know where I could possibly steal three grand. I'd never been involved in anything like stealing, and I wouldn't know how to begin. Oh, I swiped little things when I was a kid, but nothing big. I'm probably not the most honest guy in the world, but I'm no crook either. As I finally see it, there's no way I can pay these bums off, and I can't very well go to the cops because Betty'd find out. There's also the little matter of Herman getting nervous with his switch blade.

I have a couple more drinks, and an hour later I think I got a couple of ways out figured.

Next morning during coffee break, I give Doris a ring. She answers, and I tell her I'd like to talk to her about last night. She says she don't want to talk about it. I tell her I'm coming over during lunch hour. She says not to come. Bennie and Herman are keeping an eye on her, and she can't talk,

or get out. She also says there's no use talking about it because things are going to stay just the way they are. With that she hung up.

I give her another call on my lunch hour, but she says, "Eddie, I don't want to talk about it. That's all," and hangs up. She's not the friendly girl she used to be.

I thought maybe if I could get to talk to her, and explain how things were with me, she might let me off the hook. Well, that was just one of my ideas. I still had one to go.

After work Bennie and Herman meet me on the sidewalk and take me around the corner to a little joint for a drink. We sit in a booth with our drinks, and Bennie says, "How ya comin' with the three grand?"

This is where I clobber him with my second idea, which, I figure, can't miss.

I tell him, "Look, first off, I never got no three grand, or any part of it. Second, I got no way to get three grand or even three hundred. Third, I put this whole deal down in writing in a sealed envelope, and left it with a buddy. I told him to give it to the cops if anything happens to me. Now go back and tell your boss I won't play. Tell him to take his three grand out in trade with Doris."

Bennie turns kind of white, and after a long time he says, very quietly and slowly, "I think you're making a big mistake." With that

he and the big hulk walk out of the joint, and leave me to pay for the drinks.

As I'm coming to work the next morning, I see Bennie and Herman waiting for me. I figure they've talked to the boss, and now they've come to tell me to forget about the whole thing.

Bennie sidles over, and says that he talked to the boss, and told him what I said. He says the boss told him to tell me that he isn't falling for any kind of crap like I'm trying to pass out. Bennie kind of casually points out how many unsolved gang killings there are every year. He also says that the boss feels kind of sorry for me, and that he's trying to work out some way for me to get off the hook. He says he'll see me after work about it.

Naturally this little chat doesn't fill me with enthusiasm. I figure I've probably had it unless the boss comes up with something pretty good. After what seems like about eighty-five hours, five o'clock comes, and I hurry out looking for Bennie. I'm so beat out by now, I don't really care much what happens, so long as it happens quick.

My two friends are waiting for me, and we go to the same little joint again. This time I make sure Bennie pays for the drinks.

Bennie says that the boss has come up with an idea to get me off the hook. He says the boss is pretty

smart, and he's set this thing up because he thinks I'm probably a pretty nice guy who's got himself into a tough spot.

The smart idea the boss has works like this. The wholesale house I work for has one hell of a lot of expensive merchandise in it. They carry jewelry and watches, and a lot of other small, but expensive stuff. There's no watchman, but there is a very effective burglar alarm system. On Friday night, I'm to punch out, but not leave the building. I'm to hide somewhere, and after everyone has left, I'll turn off the alarm system. I'll open the back door, and let Bennie and Herman in. The three of us will have all Friday night, all day Saturday, and until early Sunday morning to work. We'll take our time, and get together a whole truck load of the most valuable items in the house. The stuff will be stacked on hand trucks just inside the shipping room door. Early Sunday morning a truck will back into the shipping dock. We'll raise the door, and in a matter of minutes have the truck loaded. We'll drop the door, and the truck will drop me a few blocks away. The burglary won't be discovered until Monday morning, and we'll all be in the clear. The boss will wipe out the three grand, and everyone will be happy.

I tell Bennie that I guess I don't have any choice, and we set up the exact time for me to let him in. He

reminds me to wear gloves before fooling with the alarm system, says he'll see me Friday, and he and Herman leave.

By Friday I'm a nervous wreck. Even the boss notices it, and asks me if I'm having trouble at home. I tell him no, I've just had a touch of the flu.

I make sure I'm one of the last to punch out, and I hang around long enough so that everyone else is away from the time clock. I sneak up to the third floor women's can without anyone seeing me, and hide there. In about five minutes the lights go out, and I know the boss is getting ready to lock up. I give him another five minutes, and come out of the can. Without making a sound, I get down to the first floor, make sure everyone's out, and the joint is locked up.

About a half an hour later I put on the gloves, turn off the alarm, and let Bennie and Herman in the back way. I show Bennie the layout, and he decides what's to go. We get right to work loading the stuff on hand carts. We work until about midnight, and then take a break to eat the sandwiches Bennie brought. We break out a couple of air mattresses, and catch a few hours sleep.

By four o'clock Saturday afternoon we're finished. We got every hand cart in the place loaded and waiting for the truck to come at three thirty Sunday morning.

Herman is watching a cartoon show on TV, and Bennie and I are playing gin. None of us can sleep, and we just wait for the truck to come. About three o'clock we go down to the shipping dock, and listen for the truck. Right on the dot, we hear the truck backing in.

Bennie says, "Eddie, there's been a little change of plans. You're staying here. Herman, Doris and I talked it over, and decided you're the kind of a guy that might start talking to the wrong people."

I open my mouth to protest, but before I can say anything, I notice Bennie's gun looking me straight in the eye.

Bennie says, "Sorry, Eddie, but that's the way it's gotta be. Doris said to tell you she's sorry too. You and her must have got along pretty well."

By this time the truck is all the way in the loading dock, and we hear the driver cut the engine. I'm standing against the wall on one side of the overhead door, and Herman's on the other side with his hand on the button that raises the door. Bennie tells him to raise the door, and Herman presses the button, and walks to the center of the door to welcome the driver.

As the door goes up, I see the surprise on Herman's face as he reaches inside his coat and comes out with his gun. I see the surprise turn to something else as a burst from a police sub-machine gun

damn near cuts him in half. His guts beat the rest of him to the floor, and I'm thinking it's a hell of a mess for someone to clean up.

I look for Bennie, and see him duck behind the loaded hand carts. Flame comes from Bennie's hand, and I realize he's shooting. When I feel the sharp sting on the side of my face, I know it's from the cement blocks behind me, and that Bennie's shooting at me. Before I can think what to do, all hell breaks loose. The sub-machine gun, and five or six other police guns are all firing at once from the door. As I watch, the oily face disintegrates into a mass of red pulp, and slowly drops behind the cart. Almost as soon as it began, it's over. A dark stream is running from behind the hand cart, and I realize Bennie's had it.

The cops come in, and explain that everything went OK. When they tried to stop the truck a block away, the driver jumped, and was crushed under the wheels. The Lieutenant also explains that they've checked these hoods out, and they're not part of the "Outfit." They're just small time punks trying to make a big score.

Ten minutes later reporters and photographers show up. They take pictures of me and the two dead hoods, and ask a lot of questions. About half an hour later my boss shows up and shakes my hand. He says how I'll be rewarded for this, and maybe even get a raise. Pretty

soon the cops say I can go. My boss wants to give me a ride home, but I tell him, "Never mind, I've got a lift." He tells me to take Monday off with pay, and we say good night.

As I walk down the hall towards 267, I take the key out of my pocket that Doris had given me during her more friendly days.

I hadn't told the cops about Doris because I didn't want Betty to find out. I figured that now with both Bennie and Herman out of the way, who would ever know?

I opened the door without knocking, and slipped in. I went into the bedroom, and there she was. She was sleeping on top of the sheets with one of those transparent black lace things on. I felt the old tickle as I gently roused her. She slowly opened her eyes, and said, "Eddie, honey. Everything go OK?" She moved over, and patted the bed beside her.

An hour later I was home. Betty

was waiting up for me. The reporters and photographers had already been there. Betty said she was so proud of me that she could almost burst. My boss had called a few minutes ago, and told her that I was going to get a \$500 reward, and a \$10 a week raise. We talked for a couple of hours, and then had breakfast. Betty rushed out to get the morning papers while I shaved and showered.

Betty got back with the papers, and there was my picture all over the front page. We read the papers for a while, and then Betty said, "Eddie, did you see this story about that poor girl at the Sherman? They found her this morning all beat up . . . two black eyes and some teeth knocked out. She says that she doesn't know who did it, or why. Just says some guy came in and beat her up. Poor thing, she was probably a real nice girl too."

Betty put some bandages on my knuckles which were pretty well skinned up, and I went to bed, and slept like a baby.

Mother Love

BY MARION DUCKWORTH



A thing of beauty is a joy for ever . . . and ever . . . and ever.

EDNA sat by the bedroom window with the Western Union Telegram clutched in her hand, as the rain tapped out its monotonous theme on the window pane. The words ARRIVING 4:00 P.M. TUESDAY stood out in bold letters and Edna was too excited to do anything but sit and daydream the remaining two hours until Henry would be home. *Henry had not yet seen his baby daughter.*

Edna's daughter had been born a year ago today. It had been a bleak and rainy day just as it was now and she'd been alone since Henry was overseas with still a year to go.

The labor pains started at 4:00 a.m.. Edna went into the bedroom and took her overnight case from the closet. As she packed her two newly purchased nightgowns, she

remembered the care she had taken in selecting them. They had to be just right for the new role she would be playing in life. She fingered the pink and blue ribbons that ran through the white cotton lace neckline then folded them carefully and went for her toothbrush and other things she would need for her stay at the hospital. Everything packed and ready to go, Edna carefully turned out the lights and locked the front door behind her and left for the hospital only a few blocks away. The rain beat down on her giving her goose flesh and by the time she reached the hospital she was drenched. She was met with a wheel-chair and taken upstairs to the labor room where for the first time she realized she was scared! There is no turning back in a situation like this; no changing your mind and saying "I'll come back some other time."

She lay there for several hours watching the dawn come up and wondering why her baby was taking so long to be born? Edna thought about the white sweater and booties she had knitted for the baby and laughed when she remembered the time the instructor had told her it was a baby and not an elephant it had to fit. Edna had enjoyed the weekly knitting lessons at the neighborhood settlement house. It had given her a chance to mingle with people a little. With Henry away it was very lonely and sometimes she found that days had

gone by and she hadn't spoken a word to anyone.

A sharp twinge brought her back to reality. It was now 9:00 a.m. and the day shift came on and a different nurse came in to check on her. "How much longer will it be?" Edna asked nervously. The nurse smiled reassuringly and said, "It won't be too long now". Edna didn't like waiting. It gave her too much time to think, to wonder if her baby would be beautiful and delicate or plain and dowdy like she. Edna had been hurt all her life because she wasn't pretty. Nice things were never bought for her, she was never given presents nor paid compliments. She remembered her mother's thoughtless remarks like knives twisting in her heart. Edna had two older sisters who were quite lovely and their clothes would be made over for Edna. Her mother thought it quite foolish to buy new ones. For as she said, "Who would ever notice anything fresh and pretty on Edna?"

How she had caught Henry she could never understand. It had come about quite suddenly and she supposed it was their loneliness that brought them together. They had met on a snowy Christmas Eve in the bookshop where Edna worked. It had stayed open for the convenience of late Christmas shoppers and she was alone. Henry had just wanted to duck out of the snow for a few minutes, but once inside had decided to buy himself

a Christmas present knowing full well that it would be the only one he would receive. He had no family. When asked to suggest a good book, Edna had been in her glory. Books were just about the only thing she could really talk about. Getting into a deep conversation, Henry had dared ask if she could possibly continue it while having dinner with him. Edna had accepted breathlessly. Edna had gift-wrapped a book, one of her favorites, and asked Henry ever so shyly if he would please accept it as a present from her to him. He had been touched and blushingly thanked her. She had closed up the shop and they had left together for their date. They seemed to get along so well that he asked if he might see her again, and by the time his furlough was up they were man and wife.

It was now 2:00 p.m. and all of a sudden Edna felt the baby coming. She screamed for the nurse to come quickly. The words "please be beautiful" died on her lips as she lapsed into unconsciousness. At 2:08 the baby was born.

Edna was in a daze when she came to in the delivery room at 3:00 p.m. When her eyes came into focus she saw white figures bustling about. The doctor came over and placed a warm bundle in her arms. He said, "a beautiful baby girl". The tears burst from Edna's eyes as she looked down, and in-

deed it was . . . a beautiful baby girl.

Edna couldn't get over the perfection and beauty of her little girl. The nurses boasted of her loveliness and Edna swelled with pride. The only thing that bothered Edna was the fact that Henry would not see the baby until it was a year old. But Edna vowed that she would keep the baby as beautiful and perfect as it was then, so Henry wouldn't miss a thing.

After a five day rest in the hospital, Edna and her baby were ready to go home. The nurse dressed the baby in the layette that Edna had carefully prepared and finished by adorning her with the white sweater and booties which seemed to fit just right. The nurse held the baby while the three of them rode down the elevator. As she placed the baby in Edna's arms she gave them both a reassuring smile and wished Edna "lots of luck." As Edna descended the steps of the hospital and started the short journey home, she caressed her daughter, murmuring close the vow she had made secretly to Henry.

All that had been a year ago, and now Henry was on his way home. Edna got up, her body quivering with anticipation, went into the kitchen and lifted the lid of her home freezer . . . just to make sure her little darling was as perfect as the day she was born.



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Cell 41

State Pen.

Dear Baby,

There's this swingin' magazine called *Manhunt*.
Fence the fur and get a subscription. And baby . . .
hurry! It's important. There's a story about this shill
and this rich stiff and this broad that I wanna' keep
for future reference.

The screws up here are full of laughs. See you
in three to five.

Your lover,
Charlie

P. S.

See page 85



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Stunning Gwynn Elston
bigs Perry to protect her
when she nearly gulps a
fatal cocktail . . . then
they nab her for First
Degree MURDER!

3 The Case of the
SPURIOUS SPINSTER

Perry is plenty puzzled.
Two spinsters disappear.
But one of them is a
phony — and he's got to
find her before the REAL
one gets killed.

4 The Case of the
SHAPELY SHADOW

The Judge wants a mis-
trial, favoring Perry.
But, strangely, Perry
doesn't — even though it
would save his client
from the DEATH PEN-
ALTY!

5 The Case of the
DUPLICATE DAUGHTER

Things look black. Perry's
star witness won't
talk. But the D.A.'s star
witness will HAVE TO —
if's Perry HIMSELF!

6 The Case of the
WAYLAID WOLF

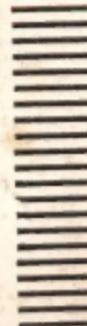
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